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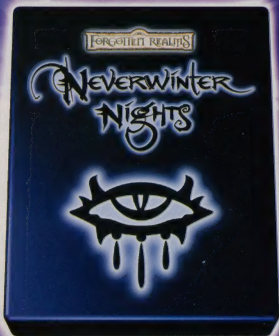
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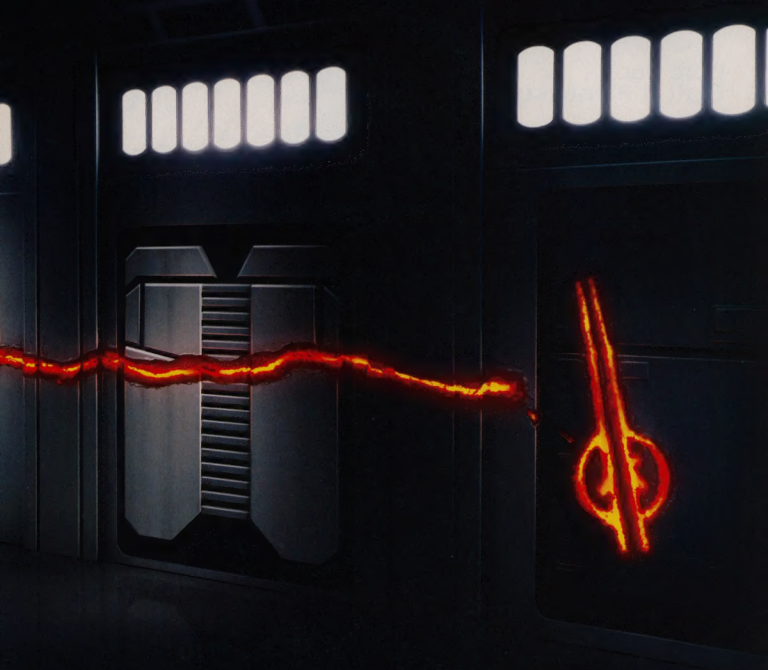


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CONTENTS

cgm • Issue 138

Dare Not Call it Fantasy

It's mythology, or at least it's Age of Mythology. The creator of the Age of Empires series turns its attention to another element of history with this 3D real-time strategy game.

BY CINDY YANS



56 Deus ex Simulacra

Inside AI: The science behind suspending your disbelief.

BY MATTHEW PECKHAM

60 Game with God

How designers help us explore religion and spirituality in gaming

BY ANDREW S. BUB

NEWswire

18 Seeding Creativity

Microsoft vows to spread the love to the mod community, plus a report on its International Games Festival.

PREVIEWS

24 A New Age of Civilization

Real time strategy tries on a new size with Big Huge Games' Rise of Nations. Also previewed this month: Hands on with the newly-finished Dungeon Siege, SWAT: Urban Justice, Shadowbane, Combat Flight Simulator 3.0, Earth and Beyond, Postal 2, Magic Online, Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter, Online Pirates, Sea Dogs II, and more.

HARDWARE

64 Lean Forward, Lean Back

Active involvement is the boon and bane of PC gaming, at least in the world of Jason Cross. Also this month: Reviews of Creative Labs' external sound card the Extigy, and a look at Gateway's mighty impressive 700XL gaming rig.

REVIEWS

68 Command & Conquer: Renegade

Pass the popcorn and check your brain at the door. Also reviewed this month: Star

Trek Bridge Commander, NASCAR Racing 2002 Edition, Black & White Creature Isle, Asheron's Call Dark Majesty, Star Wars Starfighter, Tropico: Paradise Island, Mall Tycoon, Car Tycoon, Darkened Skye, and lots more.

AFTERLIFE

88 Taking it to the Max

Brett Todd on Discreet's gmax, which adds more to modding. Also covered in the land o' mods: Return to Castle Wolfenstein, Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, Serious Sam: The Second Encounter, and more Diablo. Plus we have a feature, "Self-Loathing in Las Vegas," where our writer admits he wrote an awful game.

DEPARTMENTS

14 Upfront

Smart Upgrades—Living on the edge or moderating expectations

BY STEVE BAUMAN

94 Rebound

You like us, you really do! Welcome to the love edition of Rebound. Can you feel it? We can feel it.

98 Road to Nowhere

Babes in Boyland—The State of Girlz and Gamz these Dayz

BY CINDY YANS

99 Inside the Sausage Factory

Details, Details—Popping-up an LOD system

BY PHIL STEINMEYER

100 Three Finger Salute

Roll over, EverQuest!—There's a new MMORPG in town

BY TOM CHICK

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upfront smart upgrades

Living on the edge or moderating expectations

I bit the bullet and finally upgraded my home machine this month. I'm still waiting on the parts as I'm writing this, but thinking about hardware brings up one of the big issues facing PC gamers, the constant talk of how requirements are spiraling out of control, about how games are being made for "machines of the future," etc.

In the never-ending console-versus-PC debate, which is not what I'm talking about here so please hold all of those e-mails, a common argument is that the cost of ownership of a console is significantly lower, but how true is that? Console games are typically more expensive and aren't discounted as quickly, but the massive rental market offsets this somewhat. On the downside, increased console competition may drive the lifespan of a console down. The cost of "upgrading" to the latest, greatest may cost you \$300-\$400 every three to four years.

I briefly considered buying an Xbox, and when I did some side-by-side shopping, I came up with this:

XBox	\$300
Extra Controller	\$40
DVD Remote	\$35
Halo/Project Gotham Racing	\$100
	\$475

You might say it's not fair to add games, a controller, and the DVD remote to the Xbox purchase—and you're right—but the latter two items give it more utility, and while I have an entire library of PC games and no Xbox games, so I needed something to actually, I don't know, actually use it with. (Had I considered a PlayStation 2, I could pass on the games due to my immense PS1 library. This would assume I have an immense PS1 library, or in fact a PS1, in which I have neither.)

That's still lower than a new PC, but at least today, your console is a one-dimensional machine, so I looked into upgrading my PC. For the last few years, I've been running a 500MHz Pentium III, which was an upgraded Pentium II 350. The only major game-related addition was a GeForce 2 card that replaced a TNT2/Voodoo 2 combination.

I went with the following:

Athlon XP 1800+ Processor	\$150
NVIDIA nForce Motherboard	\$140
512MB DDR Memory	\$150
Power Supply	\$490

Looking at the price to upgrade what is essentially a five-year-old PC, that's not bad. It also shows that those who think they need to spend a lot of money every year to keep up with PC gaming is merely chasing the always-moving bleeding edge. From my perspective, it's a futile game of "mine's bigger." If your gaming expectations involve all the latest visual doodads delivered with maximum oomph, or if you're the type to obsess over benchmarks and expect the highest frame rates possible all the time, all the power to you. Upgrade away!

I had certain expectations for games played on my Pentium 500, and by keeping those in moderation as the machine aged (and adjusting graphical settings accordingly), I was able to run every game I've thrown at it with respectable levels of performance. I had no expectations of incredibly high frame rates at incredibly high resolutions, but I still managed to enjoy every game ... well, the good ones at least. I conceded that my machine was at the lower-end of the gaming spectrum, but I'd had it for five years, so what did I really expect?

Three years from now, chances are I'll still be running an Athlon processor with the nForce motherboard. I may swap in a new, faster, ultimately cheaper processor or video card at some point, but I find that if you buy smart and plan your purchases out, you can spend nearly as much (or as little) as your console friends to keep your PC pretty cutting edge (for a few years at least). It's not that hard. You can even do it on an editor's salary. •

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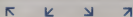
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Seeding Creativity

Microsoft vows to spread the love to the mod community

by Steve Bauman

[counterclockwise from right] Asheron's Call II: The latest entry in "best grass in a game." >>> The monster design remains strange. >>> Freelancer: Art direction still remains the game's strong suit.



If its International Games Festival, held in Las Vegas at the end of February, was primarily designed to showcase Microsoft's lineup of PC games for 2002 (and slightly beyond), its most significant contribution to gaming may be signs that the world's biggest software publisher is paying some serious attention to fully embracing and promoting user-created content. Almost all publishers have certain titles that support user-created mods, levels, scenarios, etc., but Microsoft's vision moves well beyond that of others. While there are no specific plans in place, the talk is fairly radical, with ideas like re-thinking intellectual property, with users being more like equal participants in the creation of games, and somewhere down the road possibly receiving financial compensation for their work.

"We're the entertainment business, and a lot of us on the publishers side have inherited a lot of our thinking from the rules of old, linear media," says Stuart Moulder, General Manager of Microsoft Game Studios. "Those rules generally revolve around ownership and control issues, and that mindset limits some of our thinking in digital media, preventing us from reaching our full potential."

It's all about the Benjamins

In Moulder's view, developers are still the primary creative seed when developing a game, but they need to re-think how they create their games. "[They need to] assume that the creative works will be expanded and built on, and not just as an adjunct or a separate piece but as an integral piece of the experience," he says.

He thinks the hardest thing for publishers to do is give up control, as control is all about money, and that they need to take a more radical, less "us versus them" mentality. "We need to start thinking about the creation of worlds where users are more equal participants in the creative process" he says. You already see this somewhat in persistent world games like *EverQuest* or Microsoft's own *Asheron's Call*. But in most cases you're restricted to your creative endeavors within the game itself; try to do something about/with the world outside of the game and you may be in for a rude awakening (read the click-through End User License Agreement on one of these games some day).





"Keeping them at arm's length, assuming that what they do is inferior to what we create, is a critical mistake that short-changes the potential of our business."

The way Moulder sees it, these changes could create a world of nearly unbounded creativity, where the only limits are not those of the developer or publisher but of thousands or millions of people in the user world. Sure, it's a bit utopian, but he thinks this it's the power of the digital age taken to its fullest potential. "It's something we've only started in the world of entertainment, and if we have the courage to give up some of our old ways of thinking, it could propel us ahead of every other form of entertainment out there." ●

[left] Impossible Creatures: Land Shark? >>> Whale Apes versus Manitis rhinos, hmmm... It's so impossible! And full of creatures!



AND THE GAMES ARE...

MICROSOFT ANNOUNCES 2002 LINEUP AND BEYOND

For now, most mod makers are willing to toil for free, knowing that they're supplying the community with cool stuff, and perhaps creating a resume to get an industry job. Perhaps there will be a future where those who work on mods receive some compensation for their work, either in advances ("seed money" as Moulder calls it) or things that allow the mod makers to essentially license their mods to a company like Microsoft to publish them in stores as add-ons. "If I'm going to take this created work and make it part of a club or a subscription, as soon as I attach money to it, at some point the [mod makers] are going to want a cut of this," says Moulder.

Pay service

And some sort of payment for downloads is inevitable. Distributing mods has become a much larger problem in the last year, with fewer and fewer websites around to host the 100MB or greater mods. Should users be forced to sign up for pay services, or will publishers step up and offer up their own bandwidth? Moulder thinks it'll be something in between. "At a minimum, the publisher provides distribution, a one-stop place to go [to get the files]," he says. Moulder prefers the magazine subscription model for longer terms, a one-time payment that avoids one-a-month charges, or those for individual downloads. In Moulder's view, this type of service could include "premium" content, as well as user content given some sort of endorsement by the developer or publisher.

A bigger problem will be filtering out the good versus the bad. "Right now, finding stuff is easy, figuring out what's good is hard," says Moulder. "It's hard today, and it'll be harder down the road." In his "future service" users would be a part of helping filter the content, ranking items much like at amazon.com.

This is the future

It's important to note that there are no specific plans for any such service from Microsoft, or at least if there are, Moulder won't own up to them. But he thinks that opening up creativity to users will go a long way toward solving the main problem with gaming today, the lack of creativity. "Old media thinking would have you believe that only publishers and developers are the creative geniuses in this world," he says, offering a lot of praise for the people that create mods. "We have the smartest, savviest, most knowledgeable set of customers that have existed for any media," he says.

In addition to talking about a mod-filled future, Microsoft was also showing their current and future games. Elsewhere you can read about *Age of Mythology* (page 48), *Rise of Nations* (page 24), *Dungeon Siege* (page 26) and *Combat Flight Simulator 3.0* (page 32), but they also showed *Impossible Creatures*, *Links 2003*, plus add-ons for *Zoo Tycoon* (*Dinosaur Digs*... you can probably figure out what it adds) and *MechWarrior 4*. The *MechWarrior* add-ons are of particular note because they come in the form of low-cost (\$9.95) packs that add additional 'Mechs (four) and multiplayer arenas. A patch will normalize all versions of *MechWarrior* so you can play against people with the packs or the *Black Knight* add-on without owning them (you won't be able to pilot their exclusive 'Mechs).

The show also served as the debut of *Asheron's Call II*, which features an all-new graphics engine that looks pretty spectacular. There's also a new combat system and more of those weird monsters to slaughter. The game that surprised the most journalists at the show was *Relic's Impossible Creatures*, which has come a long way since it was last shown to the press. Expect a detailed preview of this one as well next month.

Also on display was the semi-legendary *Freelancer*, the open-ended, *Privateer/Elite*-style space role-playing/adventure/simulation game. It still looks pretty wonderful, and certainly its feature set remains impressive, but in some ways Microsoft is facing an uphill battle with this game. They need to fight both the downside of showing it early and the press calling it the second coming and the perception that it's a "troubled" game due to its protracted development and team shake-ups. According to the game's project lead Phil Wattenbarger, the game is pretty much identical, feature wise, to those early reports, minus any pretensions toward being massively multiplayer.

Expect more coverage of these games in the coming months. ●



Inner Sphere 'Mech Pak: For less than \$10, you get new multiplayer 'Mechs and some new arenas.

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING? |||||



Brad McQuoid
President, Sigil Games

"Actually, I'm playing *EverQuest* more now than I ever have before. It's great, I've got time to play and to enjoy. It's just nice to play the game I worked so hard on. I [also] just got *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* finally, and I'm really blown away."



Tim Farrar
Producer, Mad Doc Software

"Well, I play *Jane's Attack Squadron* every day, but I get paid for that! I just finished the *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* single player campaign, and I've also been playing it online. I've been playing some *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* online, too. I recently re-installed *Age of Wonders*, and got addicted to that all over again."



Eric Wang
Director of Product Development, Westwood Studios

"I love playing online games. I have a 56th level *EverQuest* character, and I've just started playing *Dark Age of Camelot*. On the consoles I'm playing *Gran Turismo 3*, *Grand Theft Auto 2*, *Final Fantasy X*, and *Rogue Leader*."

SPOTLIGHT



Super Sims Hot Date Editor

SuperSimsHack.com

If you're the slacker type (i.e. a game reviewer) who needs to pump up your Sims characters, there's nothing quite like an editor that allows you set all of your character traits, pump up your simoleans, add an unlimited number of neighborhoods and downtown areas, and do all sorts of things that stand a good chance of freaking out your game. This \$9.95 program lets you make babies, give your abode some of the non-purchasable items (i.e. urns, ashes, and the ever popular garbage), add your own background

music files, change all of your relationships with the various SimCitizens, and specific to *Hot Date*, you can make your sim a permanent downtown dweller. Oh, and most importantly, you can make your sims walk through your simbad naked, and also eliminate the little "censored" square that pops up over your character when you're going to the bathroom or showering. (And who hasn't wanted to see virtual peeing, you weird fetishists you?)

TOP SELLERS

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT
Electronic Arts
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 2 | THE SIMS HOT DATE
Electronic Arts
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 3 | HARRY POTTER & THE SORCERER'S STONE
Electronic Arts
Not Rated |
| 4 | THE SIMS
Electronic Arts
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 5 | ROLLER COASTER TYCOON
Infogrames
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 6 | ZOO TYCOON
Microsoft
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 7 | RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN
Activision
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 8 | THE SIMS LIVIN' LARGE
Electronic Arts
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 9 | EMPIRE EARTH
Vivendi Universal
Rating ★★★★★ |
| 10 | THE SIMS HOUSE PARTY
Electronic Arts
Rating ★★★★★ |

11. *Civilization III* (Infogrames); 12. *Backyard Baseball* (Infogrames); 13. *Diablo II Expansion Set: Lord of Destruction* (Blizzard); 14. *Loopy Landscapes* (Infogrames); 15. *Sim City 3000* (Electronic Arts); 16. *Backyard Football 2002* (Infogrames); 17. *Hoyle Casino 2002* (Vivendi Universal); 18. *Age of Empires II* (Microsoft); 19. *Combat Flight Simulator 2.0* (Microsoft); 20. *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* (Ubisoft)

Source: NPD INTELLECT® Market Tracking. The December list is based on units sold by forty-five retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

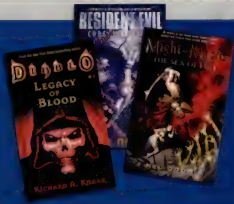
OFFBEAT

Everybody's got a book...even zombies!

Various publishers, about \$6.99 each

Games based on books are nothing new, and neither are books based on games. There have been *Doom* books, *XCOM* books, and even a book (*Chronomaster*) based on a game based on the writings of Roger Zelazny. Sometimes publishers release books based on or promoting games that haven't even shipped yet. Thus, we have the 2001 novel *Might and Magic: The Sea of Mist*, pumping *Might and Magic IX*. You can read about *Diablo*

(*Legacy of Blood*), *WarCraft* (*Lord of the Clans*), and even *Resident Evil*, a series that has spawned at least six novels. There's even a *MechWarrior* line of books, distinct from the authorized *BattleTech* novels. Are any of these books any good? Um, well, some of them are readable—but then, we get 'em for free.



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ARMOR: When a player picks up armor you'll see them wearing it. Armor will have to be shot off to cause any damage!

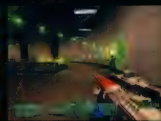
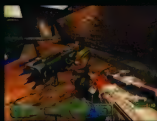
STAMINA: Jumping around and carrying heavy weapons will tire you out! If your stamina depletes, you'll be unable to move or even breathe, making you an easy target.

CHARACTER CLASSES: Each character class is unique and carefully balanced and each has its own character model and playing style.

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Violence

IN STORES EVERYWHERE JUNE 2002

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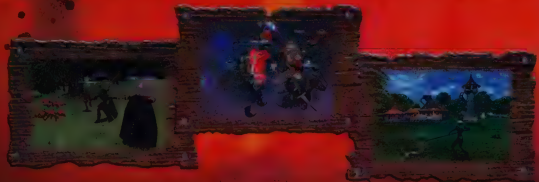
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A New Age of Civilization

Real time strategy tries on a new size with Big Huge Games' *Rise of Nations*

by Tom Chick

Zoom Rise of Nations all the way out and you might think you're looking at Firaxis' latest *Civilization* game. Zoom all the way in and you might think you're looking at *Empire Earth*. Take a look at the interface and you might think you're looking at *Age of Empires*. Even the game's background matches that of *Age of Empires*: a Sid Meier protégé straying from his turn-based roots to form his own company and create a historically oriented real time strategy game. No matter how you look at *Rise of Nations*, there's a sense that you've been here before.

Rise's creator is Brian Reynolds, the lead designer of *Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri* and now the founder of Big Huge Games. Although it may look as if he's taking the road well traveled, there's more here than meets the eye. "We found that the games we were playing in our own spare time were all real-time games," he says. "And we started to notice a lot of things we wished were in real time games but nobody seemed to have done them. The more we played, the more excited we got about doing a real time game ourselves. We felt like we could bring some of the magic of turn-based games to bear on the genre."

What's old is new

Reynolds' magic seems to be a matter of folding some new concepts into an old genre: a new model for base building, a political dimension, a gradually emerging resource model, and a tech tree that allows the game to be played different ways.

"You're not just building a base," Reynolds says. "You're building a whole nation of many villages and cities and metropolises." You start by putting



down a village and then building structures in its immediate radius. With enough improvements, and tech level allowing, villages grow into cities and then metropolises, each more powerful and allowing more buildings to be set up around them. These buildings are out in the open and vulnerable to attack. Without defenses, another player can march up and destroy libraries, barracks, and granaries, plundering their resources. Or an attacker can attempt to capture a city by reducing the city center to zero hit points. Instead of destroying it, this transfers possession to the attacker, who can't use the

city or any of its buildings until the city center repairs itself over time. It's not enough to simply destroy the defenders; you also have to hold out against any counterattacks.

Bordered

One of the most important functions of a city is to extend your nation's borders. Fortresses also extend your borders, so you might find two players setting up pairs of opposing fortresses to push their territory against each other without coming to blows. Reynolds calls this sort of territorial jostling *Rise of Nations*' "political subgame". These borders are important not just because they define where you're allowed to build, but also because your units won't heal outside your

a resource location determines your income, which is automatically dumped into your coffers without having to be carried back and forth by peons.

Tech and resources

As you advance tech ages, you begin to factor in resources like metal and gold. Once you build a marketplace, you can create caravans to earn gold. Each pair of cities can support one caravan, so you'll want to have multiple cities with marketplaces. Knowledge is an important resource for discovering new technologies. Accumulate it by training scholars and parking them in universities. Each city can only have one university, so the more cities you have, the faster you can accumulate knowledge. In the Industrial Age, you'll discover oil, which appears on the map and suddenly introduces new locations of strategic importance. One of the options in *Rise of Nations* is to limit oil to the sea, making navies indispensable.

"It's not just about banging away on heaps of resources," says Reynolds, "Each commodity is gathered and spent in an interesting way." *Rise of Nations*' special resources are perhaps the best example of this. There are 32 goods like dye, silk, spices, and aluminum, each of which gives your nation a bonus if you control them by parking a merchant unit nearby. For instance, diamonds improve your commerce, which is a cap on your resource income rate. Horses reduce the cost of all cavalry units while salt reduces the cost of all infantry.

The tech tree controls the pace and direction of the game. There are four areas of technology—civics, commerce, military, and science—

Tactical elements like formations, flanking and elevation bonuses, and rivers will play an important part in combat. >>> Armies with a general will get special abilities like forced marching, rallying, and ambushing.

borders. When enemy forces cross your border, you'll be alerted with an audio cue. There are technologies that lift the fog of war within your borders. One of the victory conditions is to control a certain percentage of the map.

Borders are also an important way to prevent rushes. A nation can't enter another nation's territory without declaring war. One of the game modes, "Peace until Gunpowder," enforces peace until someone discovers gunpowder. Until then, you'll be building up your armies and jockeying for the best territory. Think of it as the set-up phase in a game of *Risk*. Once a player discovers gunpowder (or whatever tech is specified when the game is set up), the cold war turns hot and the fighting begins. "No one's ever had a game mechanic to enforce no rushing," Reynolds says, "But we've got diplomacy to do that."

Perhaps the most important aspect of borders is that you can only harvest resources from within your territory. When *Rise of Nations* starts, food and timber, harvested from farms and woodcutter camps, are your only resources. The number of workers assigned to

with eight steps. Buying each step gives you an important bonus.

Advancing to a new age has a resource cost and requires a total number of technologies. "We wanted you to have some choice regarding how you develop your society," Reynolds says. For instance, you can focus on military technology, boosting your units' attack ratings and hit points, or you can focus on civics technology, increasing your city limit and the radius of your political territory. Commerce raises the limit on resource income and science reduces the cost of new technologies and advances.

It's obvious that *Rise of Nations* has elements from games ranging from *Civilization III* to *Kohan* to the historical titles it so strongly resembles. But what's ultimately unique, and what will make or break Brian Reynolds' first real-time game, is how all these elements come together when the game is finished in 2003. ●





Grab a Suitcase, Diablo

Dungeon Siege could be the game to send Big Red packing

by Cindy Yans



Microsoft, which somehow almost always knows a good thing when it sees one, is the entity standing solidly behind Gas Powered Games' *Dungeon Siege* as it makes its way down the home stretch. In fact, assuming all went well during its final production moments, you may already own it, as it's scheduled for release in the first week of April.

An early press version of the game, with an abbreviated section of the full single-player game, offered a pretty realistic representation of the ultimate look and feel of the final product. *Dungeon Siege* is a no-muss, no-fuss, jump right in, no manual necessary, intuitive, before-you-know-it-you've-slain-ten-monsters type of game. After clicking on "Single Player" (this build lacked multiplayer and did

not come with the Siege Editor), you play the Name Your Character Game, that all-important and generally highly debated Gender Choice Marathon, and you're off.

In the beginning, GPG created Farm-boy

Looking around (the mouse rotates the camera left and right or up and down), the view right out of the gate is breathtaking. Since you didn't read the manual, you run your cursor over all of the user interface elements, each of which is clearly annotated. You choose the Save-Load icon and open the Options Menu. You'll probably want to look at the keyboard customization section because, although the controls are intuitive, there are many, many hot-key combinations for just about anything you can imagine, including some pretty sophisticated combat tactics. And of course, you can re-map to your heart's delight. You choose the "Easy" difficulty level, because you don't want to get slaughtered too quickly—besides, no one will ever know.

You enter the video options section. You're running at a 640x480 resolution. Gulp. So much for being bowled over. You bump up the resolution, return to the game and... the view is absolutely breathtaking, and you are completely bowled over (*déjà vu*). Let the game begin.

Around the world in florld haze

The story seems ambiguous at first, but this is not necessarily the most "epic story" game you're likely to see. Think *Diablo* with quite a few more levels of narrative. There are story exposition and enhancements throughout the



(from top) Coral reef it isn't. Crystal cave it isn't. Purple shard? Probably.
>>> The water turns into a river of blood. >>> A world of adobe, a world of sand, a desert canyon.



Murray? Horte? Is that you? >>> Scorpion in serious need of dental work.

game via non-player characters or informational tomes. You navigate solely via your sword cursor, which walks you to wherever you click if it is a relatively short distance, or speedily runs you if you click farther away. This is a very handy thing for exiting buildings (which are cutaway as you enter them). You simply click on any outside spot, and even if you're upstairs in a third floor bedroom, your avatar will path its way down the stairs and outside to your chosen destination.

An overhead map permits navigation via cursor as well, as long as you have already cleared the fog-of-war for the chosen area. You can do the clearing via the overhead map as well, which provides you with a more pointed sense of direction, but you won't want to. There is, after all, a compass in the upper right that you can toggle on and off. But compass or no compass, you'll want to navigate through the real-time world, because it is absolutely gorgeous and you will not want to miss a speck of it.

You won't get stuck behind trees because the clipping algorithm (which normally keeps you from going into most non-navigable areas) ignores them. You simply glide through them as they become opaque, almost as if you are really sliding artfully through the forest, avoiding the trunks and brushing the leaves and branches back with your body and hands. Flowers, butterflies, Tinkerbell wannabes, gremels (mysterious non-threatening denizens), deer—all of these and more add to the spectacular ambience.

Designer Chris Taylor is probably best known for his work on the *Total Annihilation* strategy games. One of the best things about the world of *Total Annihilation* was its level of perspective and use of topography. *Dungeon Siege* uses both of these to give you some of the most wonderful views you have ever seen in an RPG. You can peer down as cavernous waterfalls rush to turbulent depths hundreds and hundreds of feet below you, or look up and see enemies on "a higher plane" (at least geographically).

And you've heard a lot about the "seamless world" of *Dungeon Siege*. Well, believe it. When loading a saved-game or starting a new game, there is a bit of "world preparation" time necessary, but there are no other load times at all. It is extraordinary and never takes you out of the moment. You'll never want to see a "load" screen again.

Friends and enemies

Although you will be able to complete the game as a single character alone, NPCs often offer to join your party, and if you like party combat, it's probably wise to accept them. Some characters join you for free, but the more useful ones will charge you for their services. And unlike in some other games, they are extremely easy to manage, and there is plenty of equipment, and plenty of health and mana potions for all.

Speaking of equipment, the variety is very satisfying, but it seems as though it will take a lot of time before you have high enough statistics to use much of it. Probably with a lot of game-balancing still to come after

this writing, the designers may find that they should lower some of the stats requirements or cut down the time between when you find an item and when you (or your party members) might actually be able to use it.

You do not gain "levels," per se, but you do gain increases in statistics depending upon how much you use the skill that is associated with those stats. Trying to increase all stats is not a good idea if you are working with a party. Each party member should probably have a primary and a secondary function, with group formations that protect the healers and casters and melee types up front.

Monster graphics are top notch, and a variety of baddies exude menace from every pore/skull socket/tentacle. There are many modes of combat and defensive stances from which to choose, and the sound design offers you a "verbal" warning well before a monster is on top of you. Monsters' line-of-sight is a bit uneven at this time, and often if you move even two pixels closer to a group, the entire group rushes you. But no matter, even after pumping up the difficulty level, the soundscapes are easily handled. Also, some of the dungeon areas seem a bit interminable, but spell effects and combat scenes are so fabulous that you may not mind the twenty or thirty rooms-too-many.

Details, details...

It's easy to tell that Gas Powered Games put an awful lot of thought into every nook and cranny of its game. It seems almost as though if it's not fun, it's not there—a concept to which just about all developers pay lip service, but at which so few succed.

The epic musical score, the distance at which projectile weapons and spell effects are still visible (fireballs at night or in deep caves appear almost like comets as they soar into the distance), inventory management (you can hire actual pack mules with lots and lots of free inventory slots), commerce, trading between party members, the beautifully executed day-night cycle—the attention to detail is superb.

In an early preview of *Dungeon Siege* we used the phrase "Diablo killer." If it manages to ship in as solid a state as a *Blizzard* game (and if you're holding it in your hands right now, you're either nodding or sneering...), consider *Diablo* dead and buried. ●





There's nothing more frightening than having an evil clown watching over your "breach and clear" maneuver. >>> Though mod makers filled in the holes later on, *Urban Justice* will ship with male and female SWAT members. >>> All of the models—players and weapons—feature impressive detail thus far.



Go Dynamic!

Sierra takes to the streets with *SWAT: Urban Justice*

by Steve Bauman

The tactical shooter is the current "evolution-de-jour" of the 3D action genre. Red Storm's *Rainbow Six* got the ball rolling, so to speak, and while its follow-up games—from *Rogue Spear* to *Ghost Recon*—get most of the press and acclaim, Sierra's *SWAT 3* is, in many ways, the best of the bunch. In any of its various incarnations (thanks to Sierra's wonderful marketing, we've had *Close Quarter Battles*, *Elite Edition*, *Tactical Game of the Year Edition*, and the *Year of the Cat Edition*), it remains one of the most intense 3D gaming experiences out there, with perhaps the best AI of any game of its type.

Two years after the release of the original game, the "spiritual sequel" will arrive in September in the form of *SWAT: Urban Justice*. Set in Los Angeles in 2006, it places you as part of the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit as you confront enhanced gang violence through 16 single-player missions. It drops the official Los Angeles Police Department license, which gives the developers more freedom to portray SWAT operations, according to Rod Fung, the game's Executive Producer.

"Representing the LAPD SWAT put some restrictions on us as to the weapons and tactics that are in used by D-platoon," he says. "In *Urban Justice* we have actually gone beyond what LAPD SWAT currently teaches and have included more advanced tactics and firearms usage."

Breach and clear

The basic gameplay remains the same. You're given a mission, and as the team leader of a fictional LAPD SWAT element, it's up to you to outfit your team and command their tactical actions, all following more stringent SWAT requirements for engagements (i.e. you can't just run and gun; you need to issue compliance orders, as in "Put down your weapons... please!"). While the original game had a pretty good interface, a new

streamlined "football-style" command interface lets you issue more general orders, and hopefully the new AI can implement them without getting too wonky (a problem endemic to other tactical games, but less so to *SWAT 3*).

"The idea is to quicken the pace of the game," says Fung. "We want to get away from the element leader micro-managing the teams every movement." For example, you will be able to set a command like, "Breach to Contact" and members will, in theory, breach a door and move through the environment until they encounter a suspect, and then hold for further orders. "In real life, SWAT officers know exactly what to do when they make entry, and we wanted to basically feature this in our game."

An all-new version of the "Takedown Engine" will power the game, and as evidences by the screenshots, it should deliver sharper graphics and more elaborate environments (improved shadowing should have an enormous effect on a slower-paced game like this). There's plenty of new gear to play with, including modular weapons, and you will be able to shoot through doors, walls and glass, and pick up working radios and weapons from your opponents.

Since the release of *Elite Edition*, online play has been a huge part of the popularity of the *SWAT* franchise, and *Urban Justice* adds a new 24-player mode, including (finally) a dedicated server for those large-numbers-of-players games. It will include the usual deathmatch modes (which are inexplicably popular on the current WON.net servers for *SWAT 3*), but the *SWAT* games are best played in co-operative modes,





with humans in each of the roles for your element. The new version has many different co-op modes of play, but perhaps most interesting is a Versus co-op game, where some humans can play bad guys, which sounds much more interesting than standard team-based deathmatch. According to Fung, you can set up traps and kill zones, create a fire that spreads, move all of the hostages to one room, and basically create havoc for the incoming SWAT team.

SWAT 3 has a passionate fanbase that's generated tons of additional content (try www.10-david.com), and

Fung promises they'll work even closer with the community before the game hits shelves later this year. "We are offering our full set of tools, including our new Mission Editor, which allows even the most novice of modder the opportunity to change and create new missions and scenarios," he says. "The Mission Editor is a very powerful tool for the experienced modder as well, as they will have the ability to change and move lights, objects, character placements, and create new objectives all within the tool."



[from top] As evidenced here, the new models are much more detailed. >>> By dropping the LAPD license, they can include more ways to get a guy to comply, including chest buttting. >>> Lots of nice glass to break—the new environments are more detailed than in previous versions.

Tactical action

Many of the changes to the game are designed to make *Urban Justice* a more "fast paced" game, and the immediate concern is whether this will compromise the game's tactical nature. Fung says those fears aren't warranted. "*Urban Justice* will be a bit faster paced and more action oriented than *SWAT 3*, but it will still have all of the tactical realism that made *SWAT 3* the huge success. The faster gameplay aspect was introduced to account for some advanced tactics that we are including." He says they took many of the new feature ideas directly from fans (such as having tactical shields, allowing players to chest butt suspects), and the addition of additional movements, such as going prone and climbing ladders. "We have added a lot of depth in ballistics, weapons modeling, animation, and other real-world features, and some features were added to make game play a little easier."

Fung is adamant none of the changes will compromise the game's reputation as a realistic, hardcore tactical simulation. "As far as tactics in the game, *Urban Justice* will surpass what we featured in *SWAT 3*," he says. "If you want to play the game, with slow stealth tactics, you still have that option at anytime during the game." And if Fung is at all concerned about the reaction of his passionate fanbase, that they won't like some of the changes or are concerned with it being too much of an action game, he isn't showing it. "I promise that the *SWAT 3* fanbase will really like *Urban Justice* just as much." ●



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(clockwise from left) Skeleton pet vs. giant ice troll. Note the movable, customizable interface elements on the left. >>> A fight in the swamp. >>> The graphics still need serious work in areas—look at that ground texture...ew! >>> A good shot of the minimalist interface skin in action.



The RPG That Time Forgot

To survive among its numerous contemporaries, Shadowbane has its work cut out for it

by Jason Cross

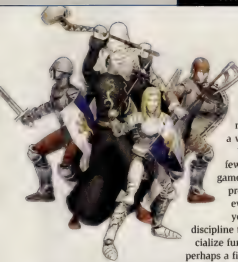


trying to steal you away lies *Shadowbane*, a long-in-development online RPG striving to prove that it's not past its prime.

The same, but different

Developed over nearly four years by Austin-based Wolfpack Studios, and recently picked up by Ubisoft to spearhead its online game service Ubi.com, it is more evolutionary than revolutionary. At the core, it's like many of the other current online RPGs—you run around and whack monsters or other players, earn experience and cash, and gain levels to give you new skills and abilities. That's not to say *Shadowbane* is going to be just like every other online RPG out there, as it's got enough twists on the standard formula to make it seem unique. Right from the moment of character creation, you'll start to notice curious differences. Choosing a character race other than human, for instance, costs character points you could otherwise spend to improve stats or abilities, and two of the races will probably remain locked until players accomplish some feat within the game world. You'll also be able to pick from a large number of Talents and Traits, which work like the perks in *Fallout* or quirks in the *GURPS* pen-and-paper RPG—they tweak and adjust the characteristics of your avatar to further personalize it. You'll also find that some character classes are unique to male

Currently, there are four massively multiplayer role-playing games that stand out—*Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call*, and *Dark Age of Camelot*. You've got *Anarchy Online* attempting to get gamers to give it a second chance after a particularly rocky start, and aging Korean hit *Lineage* trying to edge its way onto Western computers. And of course, you've got a handful of upcoming juggernauts like *Star Wars Galaxies Online*, *Worlds of Warcraft*, and *Middle Earth Online*, not to mention the non-RPGs: *Planetside*, *The Sims Online*, and so on. Somewhere between the current games trying to keep your interest and the new games



or female characters, so if you want to play something like an Amazon, you'll naturally have to play a woman.

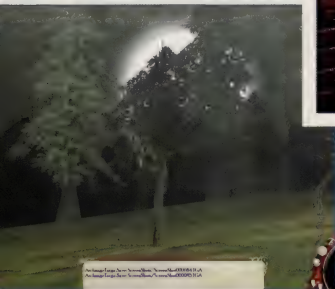
Taking a cue from a few other RPGs, the game starts you out as a pretty general class and every ten levels or so you advance to a new discipline that allows you to specialize further, progressing from perhaps a fighter to a knight, then

to a paladin. Despite this, UbiSoft

promises a game that will get players off the "level treadmill" where you whack spiders for three hours to reach your next goal and bump up your stats a bit. The idea is to break large goals down into sufficiently smaller goals where you'll see a reward even if you can only play for an hour, and to give you a lot of other interesting things to do besides fight. Unfortunately, the game is not yet in a state where you can see this in action, so you'll just have to take their word for it.

PKs of the world unite!

But the big difference between UbiSoft's entry into the potentially lucrative persistent-world game market and other online RPGs is its overall design, layout, and world direction. Instead of having several servers (shards, realms, whatever you call them) that each house several



thousand players at once and are basically mirror images of each other, *Shadowbane* will make each server a separate and unique continent in the same large world. And the best part is...you'll get to travel between them! The days of creating a new character to play with your friend on another server are over. What's more, the player-versus-player aspect is actually *emphasized* this time around. Sure, you can run around and hunt monsters if you want, but the real meat of the game comes from the guild structure. Players with enough money can buy buildings, upgrade them, populate them with craftsmen and tell them what to make, and of

course lord over the people who want to use their stuff. The object is for entire city-states to form, with full political structures. There should be plenty of tools to facilitate this. You'll be able to adjust the profit margins of your NPCs separately for guild members and non-members, for instance, or add others players or other guilds to a "kill on sight" list to make them hostile to the right enemies.

Roll your own interface

The interface for most online RPGs is complicated enough with just the relatively simple "kill monster, get experience" gameplay we already have. Tack on all the guild tools and building stuff and you've got hundreds of possible actions. Wolfpack's solution to this is giving players the ability to drag interface elements out onto the screen, so you only see those controls you choose to see. In fact, the entire interface is skin-able, so you'll ultimately have



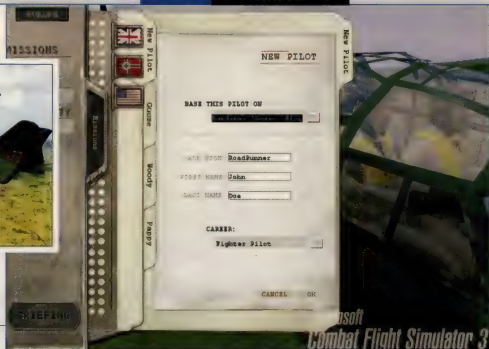
A giant war temple, and yet another interface skin. >>> The misty swamp area looks better than most.

access to a variety of layouts and visual styles. It's not hard to imagine an interface tailored for guild leaders that spend most of their time politicking that is quite different from one designed for a fighter laying siege to an enemy guild.

For a massively multiplayer RPG to be survive, it has to reach a certain critical mass that warrants its continued support. It's honestly hard to tell if Wolfpack and UbiSoft's game will have what it takes. Caught between the already-successful online RPGs of today and the big names of tomorrow's games, the odds don't look great. Currently, the game looks and feels very rough: it has only recently gotten past the difficult hurdle of making all the major game systems work in a stable fashion, and now it's time to flesh out the world, tweak the gameplay, adjust the rules, and continue testing, testing, and testing some more. In addition, the game needs a bit of a graphical facelift, which should be forthcoming. It's possible that *Shadowbane* has simply missed its window of opportunity. It will live or die by its ability to come a long way in a short time, and by UbiSoft's ability to get gamers interested in its unique game structure. ●



Jets that saw combat and some that never made it into action will be included. >>> Pilots will have personalized characteristics that affect your ability as a pilot and a squadron leader.



Sims for the Masses

Combat Flight Simulator enters its third phase

by Jeff Lackey

Tucker Hatfield, the Program Manager for *Combat Flight Simulator 3.0*, has a vision. During his days at Dynamix, the flight sim vet produced many great products such as the *Aces* series (*Pacific and Europe*) and *Red Baron II 3D*. Hatfield wants to erase the notion that a flight sim can't be both a thoroughly enjoyable and accessible game and a high fidelity simulation. The goal is for an immersive gaming experience that will appeal to both the mass market as well as those hardcore sim junkies who passionately argue over such details as roll rates, weapons effectiveness envelopes, and stall characteristics. This is easy to say and prohibitively difficult to pull off, but looking at *Combat Flight Simulator 3.0*, which is scheduled for release this fall, perhaps he's getting closer to this elusive goal.

When asked what is new in this version, Hatfield's answer is that it's easier to list what's not new. The basic

flight physics system, with some tweaks, is the same as in the previous incarnation and is based on the *Flight Simulator 2002* physics engine. Everything else, from the graphics engine to the interface system, is completely new. You can select from 18 flyable planes, including fighters, bombers, and what Hatfield likes to call "edgy" planes, those that were in production but never made it into combat, such as Allied and German jets, as well as the jet that did see significant service (the German Me-262). Plane textures and control panel details, even at this stage of development, look quite good. One particularly interesting touch is the ability to man the gun stations of various bombers and leave the flying to the AI. The plan is to also allow on-line players to man the different bomber stations in cooperative multiplayer mode.

Looking good

The graphics in this series have always been stellar, and the flight physics quite good. Critics of the series, however, believe that it lacks a compelling game mode. The campaign in version 2 was a first attempt to address this issue, but *Combat Flight Simulator 3* is more clearly focused on the game side of flight simming, including even a bit of role-playing. For example, you have to select certain qualities for your on-screen alter ego, such as superb vision (allowing you to



have the Yeager-like ability to pick out bogies from long distances), G-force tolerance, or excellent leadership. In addition, your squadron isn't faceless cannon fodder; each pilot has a name, individual qualities, and a tracked set of statistics. Your characteristics as well as those of your squad mates will increase or decrease depending upon what happens to them during the campaign. The goal is to allow you to develop a history with your squad members and make losing one of them a significant event.

The new campaign runs from 1943 to the end of the war and is playable from the British, American, and German sides. It features a wide variety of air-to-air and air-to-ground missions over Europe. While certain mission-types will be recommended, you are free to choose whichever you like. Thus, if you really like close-air-support missions, you can choose those for the entire campaign, even if they recommend an air-to-air mission. The campaign world is described as "reactive." There is essentially a bubble around you, and as you fly in proximity to various game features (airfields, trains, ports, etc.) the game reacts to your presence in the appropriate manner. For example, if you fly towards a critical ground facility, they may request immediate air assistance from a nearby airfield. Fly near a port and you will see convoys coming in and out of the docks.

"The goal is to create a very active, living world around the player," says Hatfield. "We can 'roll the dice' to generate realistic results for missions that are going on hundreds of miles away, and let the computer focus on generating a lot of activity around the player's aircraft." The system is set up to react in a realistic manner, yet provide a significant degree of unpredictability when you replay a campaign.

Online zoning

Multiplayer mode will allow for cooperative campaigns, and as mentioned above, online players can fully man bombers at each station. Persistent campaign worlds can be maintained on player-based servers. Hatfield says that one goal for the new game is to provide a campaign that plays essen-

They're putting a lot of effort into the accuracy of the cockpit graphics. >>> Players can take over the gunner's station in a bomber and leave the driving to the AI.

tially the same whether you are playing on-line multiplayer or single player. In a flight sim version of the Turing Test, the goal is to not be able to tell whether that crafty enemy pilot that is giving you so much trouble is a person or an AI player. Of course, that requires superb AI, with computer pilots that react both intelligently and unpredictably. To help in that regard, the AI is being developed by Sergei Fokin, the man behind the acclaimed *Su-27 Flanker*.

A variety of other touches are included that are intended to provide an enhanced gaming experience, such as cut scenes that show your pilot walking away from a crash landed plane, with the wrecked plane reflecting the actual damage you took during combat. However, it would be a big mistake to take these type of features as an indication that *Combat Flight Simulator 3.0* will be a "lite" sim. If they successfully fulfill their vision—and make no mistake, it's an ambitious vision that has eluded many—it could well disprove the axiom that you can't please everybody, and earn a spot on the novice's as well as the hard core simmer's hard drive. ●



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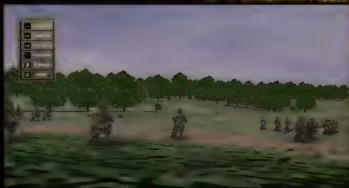
From the designers of Close Combat, comes a 3D Strategy, Real Time Action game that gives the player the chance to rewrite history in this groundbreaking redefinition of WWII tactical combat.



The most realistic real-time action of any game



The fully three-dimensional environment provides unsurpassed detail for terrain, armor penetration, vehicle movement and weapons fire.



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- Over 40 armored vehicles and artillery.
- Accurate physics model for weapons and armor penetration.
- Accurate models for vehicles, vehicle textures, and their specs.
 - *The vehicles are modeled in 3D for all aspects of their armor including thickness, slope, and hardness. The weapons and ammunition loads are historical representations of normal vehicles for each type in 1944. Vehicle crew capacity is accurate and crew members are tracked as individuals.*
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The Stars My Destination

Westwood's *Earth and Beyond* adds a sci-fi kick to EA's online offerings

by Robert Mayer



This battle beyond the stars isn't a twitch fest; think *Diablo* or *EverQuest*. In space.

Director of Product Development Eric Wang knows it's a tall order getting people to pony up \$10 a month to play a space-based role-playing action game in a newly created setting. Yet the veteran of Westwood's *Command & Conquer* "experiment"—remember that flash in the pan?—says he's confident about their upcoming *Earth and Beyond*. "I get the same feeling now that I had back when we were doing C&C," he claims, "the idea that we're doing something completely different than no one has done before."

Wang, who joined Westwood in 1995, wants his project to stand out from the rest of the persistent world crowd. In addition to trading the standard medieval fantasy setting for a science fiction one, he feels the game will appeal to more casual gamers than those who currently play games like *Ultima Online*. *Star Trek* fans, sci-fi fans, and fans of classic space games like *Elite* and *Starflight* are Wang's target audience, and he's trying to make sure *Earth and Beyond* reels them in. One way Westwood is going to do that is to tone down the experience curve.

"We're really going to compress that whole phase of you getting from a new player to an elder player," says Wang, referring to that often interminable period in most massively multiplayer games where you stand around whomping rats until you grow skilled enough to do anything interesting. "We're going to do a great job at making a better experience."

The guiding directive for *Earth and Beyond* is to create a persistent world game that's fun and rewarding when played in one-hour chunks at intermittent intervals. You'll be able to gain experience by exploring space,

or trading, as well as through combat, so if you only have time for a quick jaunt around the galaxy you'll still make progress in developing your character. The model is unabashedly Han Solo and the Millennium Falcon, with you as Han. To that end your avatar will be visible to others when you're on a space station or communicating in space, and eventually you'll be able to customize it with new gear. Most of your efforts, though, will center around upgrading your skills and your ship, which is where you'll spend the most time in-game. While the game is not a simulation—you play with mouse and keyboard, much like *Diablo*—it does revolve around spaceship combat and navigation.

Where in a medieval fantasy game you might upgrade your armor or get a new sword, here you'll add a new shield generator or improve your laser cannon. Each of the three races has its own specialty: Terrans are traders, Progen are fighters, and the Jenquai are explorers. You can mix and max for a total of nine different skill sets, but you won't be able to max out your abilities in every field. In keeping with the mandate to satisfy casual gamers, Wang says the game will insure solo players aren't left out. While groups will be able to do some things more easily than single players, going solo won't be impossible; "you just may have to work a little harder at it."

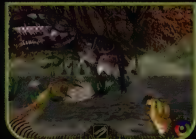
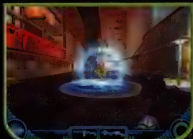
Earth and Beyond is one of those games Electronic Arts hopes will take online gaming beyond the orcs and ogres paradigm. With high production values and a clean interface, it looks good enough to the job, but



Your avatar can interact with other players' avatars on space stations. Primping and preening are as much part of the game as shooting.

looks aren't everything. The question still remains, is there a market for a persistent world game that doesn't fit the now-standard mold of existing online games? We'll find out this summer when the game goes live. ●

Futuristic Mayhem in
Prehistoric Proportions



245 million years of evolution collide in the most
furious FPS action since Jurassic times.
Play the human. Play the carnivore.

Either way, you play for keeps.



Blood, Violence





The online tutorial is excellent and will soon have novice players tapping and casting. >>> Bring out your avatars! A typical game room.

lights cards you can activate or spells you can cast with that mana. Power and toughness modifications appear directly on the creatures affected. *Magic Online* also spells the death of the subtle cheater who "forgets" to tap a land or to discard down to seven cards.

Playing *Magic* is a social activity and it is not unusual to see a 10-year-old kid playing an executive. Players talk about the game for hours in between matches and use psychological warfare during duels. Chat conversation during an online match usually consists of a couple of "Hi!"s unless you get a "trash typer" who will make sure you understand

just how much you suck. Yes Virginia, the anonymity of the net still brings out the strange in some people.

Games are accentuated with small, unique sounds and fanfares. Turn phases, summonings, discards, tapping, and special effects all have distinctive sounds that add to the game and provide punctuation. Cast a Blurred

Rediscover the Addiction

Buy, sell, and trade pixels in *Magic: The Gathering Online*

by Brett Berger

You can't stop into a game shop or attend a gaming conference without encountering Wizards of the Coast's hit card game, *Magic: The Gathering*, also known as "Magic: The Addition" and "Those Five-color Crack Cards." If you have avoided the allure of this gaming phenomenon then you can consider yourself both blessed and cursed—blessed because you are probably thousands of dollars richer, and cursed by the fact that you're missing probably one of the best games ever invented. *Magic* is a complex collectible card game with a fantasy setting in which each of the possible five card colors represents a school of magical spell casting. There are literally thousands of different cards from which you can select to build your customized play deck. *Magic Online* accurately simulates all aspects of the game including deck construction, collecting cards, casual play and tournament play.

The GUI fits all necessary information into an attractive play area in which you can easily view play decks, graveyards, your hand, life totals, and played cards. When you "tap lands" for mana, the game automatically high-

Opening virtual packs looks only that new-card smell.



Mongoose and hear a low growling; counter a spell and there is an accompanying crash and burn sound. You can customize the table's appearance in many different ways and the size of cards adjusts automatically depending on how many you play.

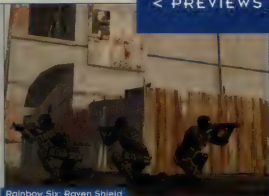
Most *Magic* players have way too many cards—it's a fact. You need a computer just to keep track of them and *Magic Online* gives you a simple utility to manage your collection and build decks. You can filter the cards by various attributes and conduct complex searches to find cards for your deck. You can use the same card in many decks and not deplete your collection so say goodbye to ripping apart old decks to build new ones.

You can mark cards in your collection for trade and enter a trade area. This is, at its core, a chat room with a trade utility. The typical chat room denizens are all present and accounted for: the non-stop cussier, the troll, and the spammer. Everyone yells out what they want and what they have like traders in a commodities pit at the NYSE. Once you are involved in a trade, the communication becomes one-on-one, and seems more like a real-life trade. The only thing missing is that annoying kiltizer who always messes up the good ones.

There is some controversy regarding the pricing of virtual card packs online. Wizards has decided that it will price virtual cards the same as physical cards. This has resulted in an outrage amongst many players and some cries for a boycott. Wizard's has responded by announcing that players may exchange online full sets for the real thing. The problem with this is that full sets are very hard to acquire and include a lot of "trash" cards. So to get the few really good chase cards in a set, you'll have to get all the bad and average cards. This pricing and policy may dissuade some, but if the online game catches on, it's hard to believe that dedicated players will abstain. Few *Magic* players can resist a new venue, so barring some serious hacking or technical problems *Magic Online* should be the next big fix. •



Multiplayer play is fully supported with several variants. >>> Most popular formats are supported including sealed-deck tournaments.



Rainbow Six: Raven Shield

The next installment of the series gets Unreal, as in the Unreal engine. Expect more action this time out. [Ubisoft]



Blood Omen 2

That lovable bloodsucker Kain is back in this simultaneous console/PC release that's a bit more RPG-ish than the Soul Reaver games. [Eidos]



Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc

The blissless one returns in another bizarrely French kind of game, and that's a good thing in this case. [Ubisoft]



Delta Force: Task Force Dagger

This series returns with developer Zombie at the helm and 10 Special Operations forces. [NovaLogic]



Note the blood effect—perhaps the background building should be the Un-lucky X Lager. >>> Postal Dude—he certainly does look maladjusted. >>> Working with the Unreal Editor in its own environment.

Drench 'em and Light 'em

Postal 2 has such a way with gasoline

by Cindy Yans

Borden's 2%? How about dousing the payroll clerk with gasoline and lighting him on fire?

While the earlier graphics were often humorous and (ahem) charming, this time you can look forward to first-person 3D, using the Unreal engine with its capability for natural terrain with 32 layers of texture blending, and technologies

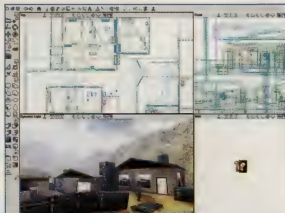
allowing for greater character and world geometry, texture detail, and a new particle system. Ignited gasoline effects promise to be splendid

A whole grisly arsenal of weapons will be available, to use creatively at your discretion, and the developers have even attempted to give you a sense of responsibility for your actions. Sure...bomb the orphanage and win valuable prizes. Seriously, though, *Postal 2* will feature a design that allows for both violent and non-violent play styles. This we have to see.

It's interesting that Running With Scissors founders Vince Desi and Mike Riedel originally developed licensed children's games and edutainment titles such as *Grover's Counting Cafe*, *Bobby's World*, and *Tom & Jerry* for Super Nintendo Entertainment Systems. And now—brutality, torture, no mercy—all in fun (?), with a touch of the company's signature

humor. What on earth happened?

Desi happily assures people that in *Postal 2*, "You can kill anyone." But when the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, and the Committee for Children, and WAVE (Working Against Violence Everywhere), and Mothers Against Violence in America, all begin to picket outside his door, will he still be smiling? Perhaps, and perhaps even all the way to the bank. ●



1997 saw the release of one of the most egregious, heinous, deliciously violent games in recent memory. Paving the way for *Carmageddon*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *Hitman*, *Kingspin*, and *Grand Theft Auto*, was *Postal*. Its rather dismal gameplay mattered very little to scads of people who picked it up simply for its shock value.

Mom always said "don't play ball in the house." Mom always said, "Don't run with scissors." Mom always said, "Don't throw napalm on the marching band." The creators



If the ships really do look this good in the game, being a sailor should be fun. >>> [inset] This harbor graphic shows a distinctive European tilt to the game's style. >>> [below] The ships, like all the game's big objects, are modular, and you can customize them.

In the 18th century the Caribbean wasn't a very safe place to be, unless you traveled by man of war and with a few hundred of your closest hammock-mates. In addition to war and revolution, there were pirates lurking in the sea lanes, preying on the wealth of passersby and relying on the strength of their shot and steel. It was a colorful, if rather deadly, era.

Vienna, Austria-based neo Software Productions hopes to capture that feeling in its upcoming massively multiplayer game *Online Pirates*. Much like Sid Meier's classic *Pirates!*, this game will put you in the boots of a swash-buckling hero, complete with ship, crew, and a thirst for glory and treasure. The developer is building objects in the world with a lot of modularity, so you should be able to customize buildings and most importantly your ship to your scurvy heart's content. In the game, you pursue a career as a soldier, explorer, trader, or plain old buccaneer. No matter what your choice, you'll need a ship, and from the screenshots available this will be a pretty attractive one at that. The ships, buildings, and indeed the whole world is in 3D, of course, and neo has been showing off its graphics technology at trades shows since the game was announced back in 2000.

As befits a game about sailing ships, you'll have to deal with real day and night cycles and realistic weather, as well as the problems of navigation. Other players will be part of the challenge, although neo Software hasn't decided exactly how to handle player versus player combat or the consequences of killing. While each player will be a distinct, individual hero, you'll have to recruit men to crew your ship if you want to be effective, and combat between ships is likely to be a common occurrence. How they handle this sort of thing remains to be seen. Presumably this, like player killing, will shake out once the game enters beta testing. You can try and get on board by emailing them at office@neo.at,

Real Pirates Don't Go Solo

Online Pirates adds a multiplayer spin to a classic genre

by Robert Moyer

subject "OP Betatest," but be advised so far most of the information available about the game is in German.

Originally expected sometime in 2001, the game is now in active development and, while there's little hard information available, the basic concept of a massively multiplayer game where players are traders, explorers, and of course pirates sounds fabulous. The game itself will probably be a free download, with an unspecified monthly fee. Neo promises a gameworld bigger than any that have come before it in the persistent world marketplace, but we've heard that before too. While the fitful track record of this project so far isn't terribly encouraging, the developer at least has some high-profile titles to its credit, like the Xbox version of *Max Payne*. That bodes well for the graphics in *Online Pirates*, if nothing else. ●



Ok, it **won't** win any prizes for originality of plot. In the future, vast corporations vie for dominance in a galaxy populated by three prominent races, Humans, Jaldari, and Velleakan. Competition over the wealth of untold planets and the trade routes between them leads inevitably towards war. The government (whatever form that might take in a multi-star system civilization) establishes a group of elite Rangers to keep order. When a traitor destroys this band of interstellar brothers, and frames you for the deed, you decide to exact revenge. You're the last surviving Ranger, turned bounty hunter, with your sights set on the scum who betrayed you. You're Mace Griffin, and boy are you pissed.

But not at the look of this first and third-person action game, which features all the eye candy your average high-end PC or run of the mill Xbox can muster. Combining extensive first-person shooter style rampages with flyable (and fightable) vehicles, *Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter* attempts to combine traditional first-person shooter gameplay with typical space combat action. Such a combo isn't that far-fetched for developer Warthog Entertainment:



In Space, No One Can Hear You Ask For Bail

Warthog sends Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter after space outlaws

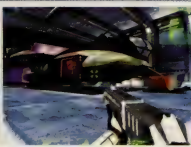
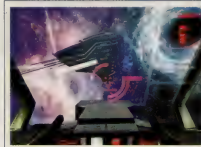
by Robert Mayer

its last major PC project was none other than *StarLancer*, the space opera from Digital Anvil and Microsoft. The key to the success of this mixing of styles is Warthog's Tusk (tusk, get it? Warthogs have tusks, see...oh, never mind.) engine, which uses something called "scene-graph principles" to allow for massive outdoor (i.e., in space) levels and sprawling, detailed indoor levels too. Transitions between the two are supposed to be seamless, using effective portal technology.

Mark Burke, Senior Vice President, Development at Crave Entertainment claims the game is "the leap forward the current generation of gamers has been anticipating," and the game's producer, Paul Chapman, calls the technology "ground breaking," but the key will be how well the game uses the bells and whistles. The developer promises engrossing gameplay, an exciting and cinematic story, and great visuals—and on paper there's a lot to be excited about. Advanced AI for NPCs, a wide variety of controllable vehicles, unique and varied weapons, and missions that include the epic and the incidental all have roles to play in the game. The controls for both first-person and vehicular action will be consistent, which should help bridge the gap between the two styles of play, and the animation system is, as EA and Warthog describe it, very advanced, including motion blending and other high-end techniques.

This should also be one of the first games to make PC users play second fiddle when it comes to graphics. While both the PC and the Xbox versions will sport some spiffy looking visuals, the fixed hardware in the console means the team is able to offer specific high-end effects for Microsoft's box. These include pixel shading and vertex shading, which should result in things like phong lighting, refractive transparency, and dynamic level of detail. The screenshots here, by the way, are from the console, but despite the hype, it's likely the PC version will look very similar in practice.

Warthog is primarily a console developer, but one with a fair amount of PC experience. *Mace Griffin* has all the right parts to be a hit; it only remains to be seen whether they'll all fit together in the right way come launch time this fall. ●



You can move from walking around with a gun to flying around with many guns. >>> Hmm, this looks like a nice ship. Let's take it. >>> [top] Ah, a lovely day on the space station. Targets everywhere!

Implant Technology

Escape a meeting of the minds in HomePlanet

by Cindy Yans



Nova or Julia set? No. Exploding ship.

From unknown publisher Russobit-M comes *HomePlanet*, a space simulation reminiscent of *X-Wing*, *Wing Commander*, and *Freespace*. Developer Revolt Games' debut title deals with the development of a new future in the world of space exploration.

Back at the end of the fourth century of interstellar travel, the intragalactic "New World Order" Confederation attempted to cut ties with some of its colonies, most of which were rich in minerals. The oppressed colonies had developed technologies that at least equaled those of the Confederation, so they changed their trade and research priorities and quickly became the biggest trading and technological centers of the universe. Almost two centuries later, the Klouto enclave perfected a neural implant system that, at first, merely aided individuals whose stressful jobs lay in such areas as air traffic control, engineering services, and handling of nuclear matter. This technology developed into implants that could form a network of the mind (think collective consciousness), and eventually the stronger-willed individuals could force feed their colleagues with their own agenda (think mind meld). Initially, law enforcement, military, criminal, and administrative personnel used this to their advantage, but then of course someone got greedy, and an all-out power struggle resulted in the 27 war clans of Klouto trampling down all industrial and scientific potential of the planet.

The Troiden clan, founded by one Lance Troiden, was the smallest of the 27. When it became apparent that they stood no chance against the remaining predators, Lance's son Reef managed to escape the planet with parts of its laboratories still intact. Their quest? Finding another *HomePlanet*.

In searching for the new home, Reef will have a chance to fight against different opponents from different clans, to fly over six different types of spaceships of the over 60 existing models. In a tactical but action-filled space shoot-'em-up, you'll customize your ship for the over 20 non-linear missions, and fight the science vessels of a humanoid alien species in open space and in orbits of different planets, with the Confederation as an ally, opponent or neutral force depending on your actions.

The game will use a newly developed flight model based on Newtonian physics, and includes a mission editor, allowing you to add new tasks, types of weapons, and ships to the original game. Implant yourself late this spring. ●



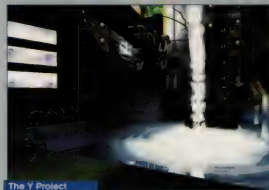
Spider-Man: The Movie Game

This part of the PlayStation 2 game will feature Tobey Maguire and Willem Dafoe doing voiceovers for Spider-Man and the Green Goblin. [Activision]



War Between the States

Two former Ensemble Studios artists, Chad and Eric Walker, have a new project with this Civil War real-time strategy game. [Walker Boys Studios]



The Y Project

A genetic experiment goes awry, turning innocuous bugs into a race of hostile, giant, mutations you must destroy. The engine is... Unreal (literally). [Westka Interactive]



Shadow of Destiny

This time-traveling PlayStation 2 adventure game goes PC. Prevent your own murder, with multiple endings based on your actions. [Konami]



Our shaven-headed hero contemplates the impending climb for coconuts. >>> Not the safest place to stand....



Mutiny on the Bounty

Piracy is Bad, except in the case of *Sea Dogs 2*

by Jontl Davies

Sea Dogs 2's predecessor—named *Sea Dogs*, strangely enough—was an ocean-based role-playing game. The sequel, due this fall, adds a new dimension to the gameplay—namely, land-based adventuring. With luck it'll also actually work this time.

Sea Dogs 2 is set in the Greater Antilles, south of the Caribbean, in a sub-tropical locale that will have you itching to pack your bags and head for the fictitious archipelago in which the game is played out. As a veritable Long John Silver, you must not only captain your very own galleon but also traverse the islands that pepper the seas—and therein lies the bread and butter of *Sea Dogs 2*'s gameplay. In keeping with time-honored RPG standards, *Sea Dogs 2* encourages you to develop your character's attributes and statistics. To do this, you must engage in battles with other ships on sea and, while on land, trade with other pirates.

Of course, interaction with the islands' inhabitants is key; a trip to a tavern and a discussion with a merchant could reveal more in the way of useful information than a skirmish at sea with a fellow parrot-wearer. Besides merely existing in the beautiful islands of *Sea Dogs 2*, it's imperative that you take on quests and challenges as per the role-playing brief. Fortunately, the quests are varied and open-ended, so it's unlikely that you'll abandon

ship anytime soon: naval adventures, for instance, rub shoulders with treasure hunting. Multiplayer games, on the other hand, include capture the fort games and deathmatches.

Sea Dogs 2 offers equal parts sailing simulation (at sea) and role-playing gameplay (on terra firma). Indeed, the game's nautical features hand full control of the galleons to you, the deck-walking, wheel-steering hero of *Sea Dogs 2*. Navigation with the aid of a compass is a skill you'll need to master if you wish to

sail the seas in an orderly fashion. More than merely a form of transport between islands, good control of the ship in your command will reap victories in battles on the high seas and aid your progression through the quests that will come your way. Like its predecessor, *Sea Dogs 2* revolves largely around naval battles. The addition of walkabout gameplay shouldn't cloud the fact that there remains

much to take care of aboard your vessel. Also, it's now possible to board enemy ships and capture their crews—which the foolhardy will surely enjoy doing—and thereby increase in prominence and stature within the game world.

Set as it is in the 17th century, the game's visual style is similar to that of *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *Confounding Factor*'s upcoming *Galleon*. There are 30 historically accurate ships to board, and countless colonial towns are scattered



You'll have to go a long way to see a more romantic sunset than this.

across *Sea Dogs 2*'s many islands. Everything you'd expect to find aboard centuries-old pirate ships—bar the scurvy—appears to be present and correct, ready to sail the high seas. Thank goodness for that. ●



Sexy and Supernatural

BloodRayne: half vampire, half clad, all woman

by Cindy Yans



With guns and blades, the lady has quadruple wield. >>> **Boji** Check out this sequence in which BloodRayne is drawing her big guns.

In the wake of *Nocturne*, *4x4 EVO*, and *Fly!* comes Terminal Reality's latest endeavor, the action-horror game, *BloodRayne*. It centers on the adventures of Agent BloodRayne as she wages her own war against the Nazis and the world of the occult. With breasts that rival Lara Croft's, and a pointy tongue dripping rivulets of blood onto the ground, she is a supernatural being—half vampire, half human, and half clad.

At the end of World War II, a group of Nazi war criminals fled to South America. There, near the coast of Argentina, they began the excavation of an ancient temple filled with "horrific powers." The excavation went on for nearly 20 years during which the Nazi's further research pieced together ancient lore connecting three artifacts. These artifacts, if joined, would create a power so great that it would rival The Power of Cheese. Surely you know who is the only being that can save the world. No, not you—BloodRayne.

The game will use Terminal Reality's all-new Internal Engine in a 3rd person 3D mode that uses a Camera FX

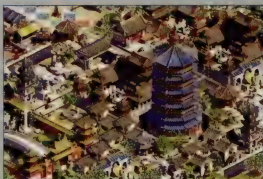
feature that pans in slow motion during fabulous moments like dismemberment or explosions. You can also trigger the camera to follow any projectile to its target.

BloodRayne's abilities include Bloodlust, which, if she drinks enough blood, puts her into an intensely violent state. If she downs a few more liters, it becomes Bloodrage, during which she can barely contain her passionate, vehement, victim-flaying wrath. She also has increasing supernatural abilities such as great speed, inhuman agility, enhanced vision senses, and the ability to slow time ("They're watching you, Neo"). Attached to her wrists are sharp silver blades for which she can gain enhancements throughout the game (and make Edward Scissorhands jealous). She can also throw and fire projectiles with the best of them.

Publisher Majesco says that "she's got looks and moves that will have gamers lust-ing for her." And even though we'll have to curb that lust until Fall 2002, it still doesn't get much more sanguine than that. ●



SuperPower
This is turn-based strategy in a real-world environment beginning on January 1, 1997 and continuing to the present. [Dreamcatcher Interactive]



Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom

Immerse yourself in the rich history of China in this add-on for Pharaoh. It includes multiplayer, a first for the series. [Sierra]



Lord of the Rings

This is the first tie-in game for the movie trilogy, and is not to be confused with Sierra's versions of the books. [Electronic Arts]

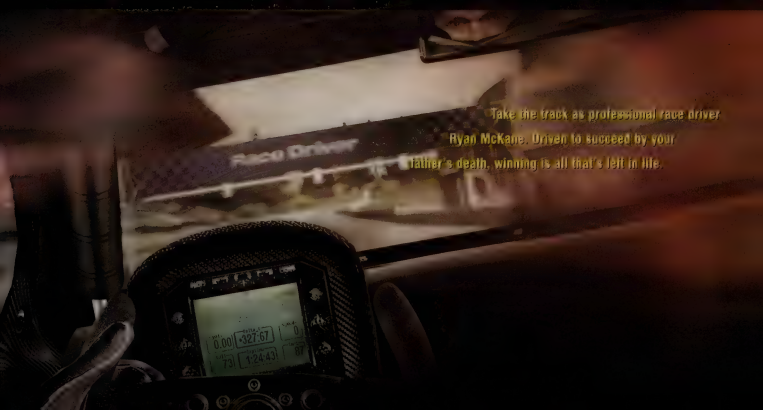


WWI

This is the working title of a real-time strategy game from the publishers of Operation Flashpoint. They promise to model heroism, confidence, despair, and cowardice.



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Screen shots taken from PlayStation 2 computer entertainment system game play.

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DARE NOT CALL IT FANTASY



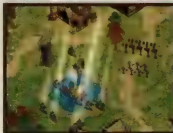
Age of Mythology embellishes its template

In late 1994, a would-be gamesmith had a vision. Was it because his Dallas software consulting firm was simply not exciting enough? Or was it just that *nothing* else is exciting enough if your dream is to make games? Or maybe it was an inkling that if you crossed higher real-time strategy concepts with higher *Civilization* concepts that success was only a (three-year) stone's throw away? Perhaps, in the end, it was a definite "in" with Microsoft that did it. Or all or none of the above? For whatever reason, Tony Goodman's notion that breeding *WarCraft* with *Civilization* would result in somewhat of a masterpiece excited enough people to band together and form the kernel of Ensemble Studios with Goodman as President and CEO. More importantly, it excited Microsoft.

BY CINDY YANS



[opposite page] Mists and mayhem, scorpions, and ancestors of Stonehenge. >>> [above] Summoning the Underground Passage gives you a free port to any explored map location. >>> [large pic right] Note the hydra. They are pretty sure that BINGO is cancelled tonight. >>> [bottom row] Once you summon the permanent Healing Springs, it will restore all nearby units. >>> Note the arc-art. This is the Norse method of gathering resources.



Age of Empires, born in 1997, was similar to its contemporaries, except that it had more—more of everything—and its great success led to the spawning of the sequel *Age of Kings* and its add-on *The Conquerors*. Ensemble grew, copies of the games flew off the shelves, and everyone was happy... until. When it announced last year that its new game was going to be yet another *Age* game, namely the 3D *Age of Mythology*, some fans were up in arms. "What, again?" they shouted. With all of the talent that had accumulated at Ensemble since its inception it could certainly eschew making another cookie cutter game, 3D or no 3D, right? But the men and women of Ensemble promise something quite unlike what you have seen before.

While some companies exist on opulent "campuses," and others in towers of steel, Ensemble's low-key comfortable digs are accessible from its parking lot through a rather labyrinthine hallway path including multiple elevator trips. It is apparent that the space is arranged for its occupants' comfort more than for cramped efficiency. Employees have personal offices with double windows—one with an outside view, and the inner one frosted so that parades of joggers through the corridors cannot peek in. It has several recreation areas: a bar with electronic lightning effects, ping pong and pool tables, vintage video games, catered meals during crunch time, and several centers for beta-testing.

Employee morale is way high on the priority list. A nice research library offers texts from

Tigers of the Snow to *Knights of the Round Table*. Coffee and snacks are readily available. They even give the artists acting classes to help them stay connected. "It's just not hard to adjust from Hell to Heaven," says Ensemble designer Jerome Jones, who has apparently been to hell and back.

Please don't call it fantasy

The *Age* series so far has been based around historical settings, and they have all had a common thread—they deal with the human experience. The team feels that the world of mythology does the same. However, they believe that this game shows history more from the peoples' perspective. "If you think about how ancient Greeks thought their world worked, mythology really defines that," says Lead Designer Ian Fischer. "They didn't think that lightning was a natural phenomenon at all; they thought lightning was an act of the gods. So we thought it was a new twist on the stuff we've done in the past." He believes that doing mythology gives the team an opportunity to do a lot of things that they could not integrate into a purely historical game.

Will fantasy lovers find the game appealing? Ensemble's Senior Game Designer Bruce Shelley thinks so. "We hope traditional fantasy gamers will



be attracted to *Age of Mythology* because the myth units are very cool to watch and use," he says. "A lot of our myth units have been borrowed already by fantasy gaming." He believes that the way the units function is very different from what gamers are used to, and that fantasy gamers who might have been turned off by the earlier *Ages* because they were based on more or less realistic human experiences, might just find the "mythology bridge" attractive.

Auto mechanics

In *Age of Mythology*, your relationship with the gods is central to gameplay. There are nine civilizations, each group of three representing three major gods from Greek, Norse or Egyptian mythology. When you start a game, you select from one of these nine civilizations, each with its own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Sounds a lot like the rest of the *Age* games, doesn't it? Each also has its unique units and buildings. Um, ditto. The Greeks' main strength is their named heroes. The Egyptians rely on their priests to curry favor with the gods. And the Norse, well, apparently the Norse are like ants. They attack aggressively, throwing huge armies of weak, lightly armored, mostly infantry units against their enemies, and spreading all over the map. They can build and expand quickly, but collapse under pressure, and quickly rebuild. Their Mountain Giant, however, is the strongest mythological unit in the game.

Each civilization has three major gods: Ra, Osiris, and Set for the Egyptians, Zeus, Hades and Poseidon for the Greeks, and Odin, Thor, and Loki for the Norse. You choose one major god, and under each of these is a "tree" of minor gods, which you choose based on which of their assets best suits your strategy. There are heroes, as well, that you can earn to augment your forces.

The early game is very reminiscent of previous *Age* games. You advance through four ages, meeting a set of criteria enabling you to enter the next

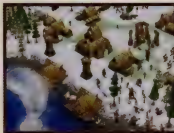
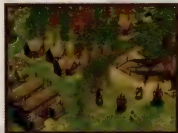
age. There is also the necessity to gather food, gold, and wood, and each culture's gathering methods will be slightly different. For instance, the Norse don't have any gather sites. Instead, they have an ox cart, which is sort of a "mobile gather site" that works for everything. So at the start of the game they don't have to send soldiers out to build a wood pen, instead they have this little ox that they move around. Which seems simple, but in terms of how you actually play the game the folks at Ensemble say it changes a lot of things.

But it's different. Really!

But still, gods, heroes, and mythological creatures... all just new units, same template, right? That is an easy conclusion to make when Ensemble introduced this game. "Sure, *Age of Whatever*."

"When we set out to do this game," says Fischer, "one of the first things we said was that we couldn't just do *Age of Kings* in 3D." He feels that the hardcore fans know there's a significant difference between the first two *Age of Empires* games, but casual players miss most of that. "We wanted to make it really obvious that when you're going into *Age of Mythology* that you're not just playing the same game with a new engine."

So they set out to do some very different things that would not be transparent to the player. Each civilization gets heroes in different ways, they have different numbers of heroes, and the Egyptians have a Pharaoh. The Pharaoh (and you only get one) empowers buildings while he is tasked on them. If he is tasked on a drop site, you will gather at



Well! Egyptian city gets its comeuppance—bolts of horror from the sky. >>> [bottom row] While the Norse civilization's infantry is a bit weak, wait until you meet up with these giants. >>> In addition to their giants, the Norse also get some naval bonuses. >>> The drum major of this Egyptian parade happens to have three heads. >>> [opposite page] Norse Earth and Fire Giants make a great combination.





25% efficiency, but you may want to then task him on a Barracks to train units faster. This is only one example of the greater-than-normal changes between playing the 3 Egyptian civilizations compared to the Greek or Norse. "That was something we really wanted to capture," says Fischer, "because we felt more could have been done in the past to make the bonuses we gave to the civs [more prominent]. The expert level players saw and knew that, oh, getting an extra 10% wood was a big deal for this one city, but a casual level player didn't care. We wanted to really make these things obvious and substantial so that they stand out."

The mythological aspects also change a lot of the ways that you play. For example, there are various choices to make as you advance through the ages that drastically change the game even if you play the same culture over and over again. The old *Age of Empires* template is still there, but the choices are exclusionary. They determine what bonuses you have at various stages of the game, and which "god powers" and mythological units you are entitled to. You only get four of them, one per age, throughout the whole game. Think of

them as "trump cards" or as very powerful *Magic the Gathering* cards.

"It's almost like a board game kind of thing," explains Fischer, "that you have this set of cards, and you're only going to have four of them and they really change how the game is played. You can figure out clever ways to use them. Some of our better players... know how to really get the most out of their god powers in the game. It's a balance in skills. If you're a really clever player and you can find a good place to use your god powers in a game, you can beat a player who's better at tactical battles than you, or better at gaining an economic advantage than you. That really changes how some aspects of the game are played." And after playing the game, he turns out to be right about that.

Annibites for everyone!

Another extremely important addition to the food-wood-gold treadmill is another resource—favor. This is a resource granted from the gods and you will need it to access all of the special mythological components of the game. As with the other resources, the civilizations get favor in different ways. The Norse fight battles to get favor, the Egyptians build monuments, and the Greeks send villagers to pray at temples. The praying villagers amusingly animate as constantly kowtowing entities surrounding the temple to which they were assigned.

The game design does not really let you accumulate favor, which has a maximum cap. It encourages you to "spend" it on special abilities, mythological creatures and improvements, and god powers. Mythological creatures are absolutely fabulous resources, rare and strong, which you can summon once you have a temple and the proper amount of favor.



The Norse Mountain Giant, as previously mentioned, is the most powerful of all myth units. He has more hit points than many buildings, and can shrug off feeble arrows and sling stones as he bashes structures with his uprooted tree club or stamps smaller units into the snow. One of his counterparts, the Fire Giant, pummels enemies with burning fists or slings molten fire at groups of units or buildings. Unlike stones from a catapult, Fire Giant's fireballs will bounce along the ground a short distance until they hit something. Finally, the Frost Giant breathes on nearby units and encases them in ice.

The Greek Cyclops is a powerful and expensive monster available early in the game whose special ability is to grab enemy units and hurl them into other groups of units, almost like knocking down bowling pins. The effect is outstanding. In fact, almost all of the animations are more whimsical than gore-laden. The Cyclops' strength and impressive hit points also make him useful as a siege weapon.

The Mummy is one of Egypt's fourth age units. While he can stand toe to toe with many human soldiers in combat, he has a special ability to convert enemy units into his evil Minions. Minions are undead soldiers with a brief lifespan. However, as if losing your units in battle to the Mummy wasn't bad enough, you have to deal with the Minions as well.

Other units include the Anubites, jackal-headed Egyptian minions of the Anubis, the son of Osiris, whose myth-life counterpart was said to have conducted the dead to judgment. Greeks have Minotaurs and medusas as well as Cyclopes. There is the Niddhog (a Norse "dragon"), Egypt's Roc, a very imposing figure that also serves as an airborne transport, and your basic, albeit frightening, Hydra.

Of course, these are the exotic creatures, but there are plenty of "normal" units such as the Greek Hoplite—the backbone of the Greek army, a soldier who wields a long spear in combat. While stronger than other infantry, they are slow and expensive. They are named for the "hoplon," the round

shield they bear. Then there's the Hypaspist—a lightly armed Greek swordsman. They excel at taking on other infantry, especially spearmen, but are weaker against other types of soldiers. Finally, there's the Myrmidon—a late-game, elite infantry unit available only to Zeus. In mythology, the Myrmidons were the companions of the hero Achilles.

The wrath of the gods

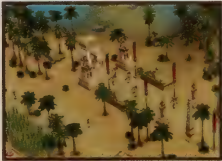
Of all the new elements in *Age of Mythology*, probably the most interesting one is the summoning of god powers. You only accumulate four of them per game, depending upon which gods and minor gods you have chosen, but proper use of them can make the difference between the thrill of victory and the agony of the feet. Note that you can use the powers only once each and they have either a single effect (lasting or temporary), or last for a particular duration. There are also various bonuses that allow you to deploy "magical" effects.

While Ensemble would only describe a few of them in detail at this stage of the game's development, a few more were viewable during a live multiplayer demonstration. With creativity, you can do some really clever things with some of the powers, most of which will remain secret and personal for about ten seconds after someone discovers them. Note that they are culture specific.

Underworld Passage creates a "virtual tunnel" although it appears to be merely a "transport" both of which result in the same effect. When the power is summoned, you choose two entrances to the Underworld between which you want to move your troops. You can



left Scarabs, and camels, and obelisks, oh my. >>> [bottom row] Were it not for 3D, this Greek town looks very similar ones in *Age of Kings*. >>> Egyptians get their "favor" by constructing monuments such as this. >>> As hippos shampoo in the lagoon, double-wielding warriors investigate an attack. >>> [opposite page] Fire Giants are (literally) the largest cause of Norse meltdown.





only deploy the entrances upon areas that you have already explored. This is a great way to go under rivers, get over to an island, or sneak an entire army behind a heavily fortified foe. Enemies can destroy these entrances, however, and most probably will.

Restoration enables all of your units and buildings to be slowly healed or repaired while this god power is in effect.

Healing Spring creates a permanent and not-attackable fountain that heals all friendly units nearby. Use it to heal up an expensive army after a particularly bloody battle.

Flaming Weapons gives all of your armed human soldiers (except Mythological Units) weapons that burst into flame. While this god power lasts, these units will do extra damage in combat.

Ancestors summons undead warriors from the earth to fight your enemies. Once this god power expires, though, your dead ancestors return to their resting places behind the crematorium.

Bronze gives all your soldiers' that fabulous Coppertone tan that temporarily turns their skin to bronze, greatly increasing their natural armor.

Convert Animal, which is actually a bonus

rather than a god power, allows you to, duh, convert animals—and there are a great many in this game, including bears, crocodiles, hippos, gazelles, lions, giraffes, zebras, boars, goats, and more—into units that you can control.

Shifting Sands allows you pick up a group of units (yours or an enemy's) and move it anywhere else on the map. Initially they visualized that this power would save your base from attack by transporting your army back to it in time. But a very clever fellow in the multiplayer demo had other plans. He first summoned Convert Animal, and gathered himself an army of lions. He built a large four-wall square (without a gate) around the lions and proceeded to summon Shifting Sands. He then picked up a large segment of his opponent's army, and deposited them into the inescapable walled-in area where the lions feasted on them mightily. Awesome!

Locust Storm summons a... guess what?

Walking Woods temporarily animates the wooded area of your choice into dreaded attack-trees. Watch your backs, enemy, the Entwives have been missing for much too long.

Another bonus ability summons a batch of Mercs to defend your town



center for a specific amount of time.

Finally, Curse (and this will probably be a favorite...) turns enemy units into pigs. Not only this, you can eat them. Absolutely fabulous.

It's clear that knowing when and how to use these kinds of abilities and how to defend against them changes the Age paradigm significantly.

For those alone times

The full single-player game was not up and running during our visit, but Ensemble shared some information and a small cut scene demo. Unlike the previous games, there is one campaign in a single story arc with 36 scenarios (plus three in the tutorial) "Since we've moved into mythology we don't have the historical kind of chapters we had in previous games," says Fischer. "The single story arc that you move through is not a role-playing game, but it is character based. The character does take on the persona of the hero in this story and we have in-game cinematics for pretty much every transition." They mentioned that these transitions are seamless, and were able to show an example. The moments when the cut scene ends and the gameplay begins are almost indiscernible from one another.

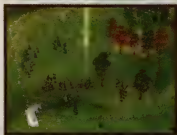
In *Age of Empires*, Producer Chris Rippy pretty much did all of the single-player campaigns, and in *Age of Kings*, almost all were done by Designer Greg Street. With *Age of Mythology*, one person is in charge of the single-player story arc, with four people assisting. A lot more person-power than before, and the team is very excited about the potential.

There is a lot more emphasis on the single-player game with its real story, plot twists, and interesting characters. As an Old World hero, you must complete many quests that will include scenarios from assisting in the siege of Troy to journeying into the belly of Hades. The team also promises campaign-only elements that will make the single-player game a lot more worthwhile than most of us thought it was in the previous games.

All about usability

While it's sometimes unrealistic for niche game designers to try and draw in the mainstream or casual player by simplifying elements of the game, Ensemble has done several things to that end. It has created a very simple and comprehensive tutorial, and it has streamlined its user interface. The result should benefit hard-core fans as well. It is a much more approachable UI with a "banner system." The idle villager banner is easily visible at the top right of the screen and appears any time you have an idle villager. If you have more than one, the banner will also display this. The other banners on the upper left are for assigning army control groups or finding your all-important Pharaoh. You can use these to create numbered groups (in addition to the old method of using CTRL/NUM to do so). For instance, you can group together a batch of archers, and set them to a Group Banner. The banner will display a bow, indicating that contents of that group are bowmen. A sword or horse banner indicates infantry or cavalry. Or if you gather a mixed batch of units, the banner will display whatever symbol corresponds with the majority of units in that group. It takes some getting used to, but is really a very valuable tool, and makes the game that much more accessible.

"We went back and reviewed our difficulty settings and how they applied to the single player campaign," explains Fischer, "and played with some casual players who probably would have played our game if they hadn't gotten attacked and felt like they didn't have anything they could do in the early part of the game. They just didn't know what was going on." So



Left: The Bronze power—your army sports a protective tan. >>> Bottom row: Who invited Medusa? >>> Cyclops—where quality is eye one. >>> Note the structured formations. It's easy to group like units together with new banner interface. Opposite page! >>> Thank gods for you—the wind beneath my Pegasus.



they've done, and continue to do, a lot of testing. They built a usability lab in their downstairs offices, hired a UI professional, and have been focusing on bringing in their non-gamer friends. "We're always surprised by the things we think are really obvious which people just don't get," laughs Fischer. "We have a tape from the Microsoft usability lab where someone actually picked the mouse up and put it on the screen."

And then there are the "pro" testers. Several areas in various parts of the building are generally packed with them. One in particular was completely filled, exuding whooping and hollering, and the shouting of "Woot!" and "Owned!" Amongst them are some of the real *Age of Empires* celebrities that have made (literally) a name for themselves in online play. There are Captain Kidd, The Sheriff, Swinger, and Jerry Terry, who placed third in the worldwide *Age of Kings* tournament. These folks really know what they're doing, and were having a wonderful time until they were called upon to demo various effects upon demand. "Man, don't make me summon Meteor now!" someone whined. Demo or no demo, no matter what, these guys want to win.

But demo they did, and what ensued is breathtaking. In a hands-on moment—well, a hands-on hour (the desired average game length), it is evident this was not the *Age* product we used to know. Yes, many of the mechanics are the same, but the number of possible strategies is immense. The 3D world comes alive, with shadows and excellent building transparency masking. The music and sound are also engaging with much original music from Music and Sound Director Stephen Rippy, who said that not only did they take field trips to find unusual ambient noise such as penguin and whale sounds, but that, as in *Age of Kings*, all of the units' verbiage is taken from their civilization's authentic language. You'll probably still feel a little bit of wistful nostalgia, though, about the derivative (although charming) Rippyspeak from *Age of Empires*.

To Oz

Although the game is unbalanced at present, it's more or less easy to see what to expect, and for the skeptics who are still shouting "cookie cutter," you'll just have to experience it for yourselves. You'll probably be as surprised as we were.

As for Ensemble, it's on the balance beam from now until show time, but the folks there haven't disappointed us thus far, and are committed to acing this project and the next, without growing too big for their proverbial britches. "We have a great company culture that we don't want to mess up," says Shelley. "We can't really comment on how big is too big." For now, though, they actually are an ensemble—defined as "a unit or group of complementary parts that contribute to a single effect." Namely, fun. ●



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Deus

So you're on this quest to kill Foozle, the resident malevolent warlock. He's got a side gig turning overcurious boys into wart toads and pawning them off on the local girls as cursed princes. You've tracked him down to his lair in the middle of enchanted BFE, scoped the area, and decided it's time to dance. You draw your magic sword, Bloodlicker, and kick down the door. The warlock is hunched over a table thumbing through some predictably antiquarian Tome of the Ineffable.

"Prepare to meet your maker, Fooz!" You flip your perfectly permed blond locks to heighten the effect. Foozle wheels and fixes you with beady wicked warlock eyes.

"Welcome Fabio," he says, perturbed. "Come to kill a harmless artificial construct, have you?" He straightens a pair of bifocals, squints, and wrinkles his nose.

"Uh, what?" you mumble, sword drooping. The wizard straightens like an accordion, gaining a foot.

"Indeed," he purrs seductively. "I know precisely who you are, loser." He cracks his bony knuckles. "You're a fat slob, and you haven't showered in three days. You're sitting in front of a computer right now, wearing a t-shirt with ketchup stains, and none of this..." He gestures dramatically. "...is real."

By
Matthew
Peckham

ex

INSIDE AI: THE SCIENCE BEHIND SUSPENDING YOUR DISBELIEF

Okay, that's just a little *too* spooky. You disconnect from the game—some new online thingy called *ForeverQuest*—and slip off your VR goggles. But something's wrong with the computer. It sounds like a microwave choking on Jiffy Pop. You finger the crusty red stains from yesterday's curly fries on your shirt. How did the program know about those? You drop the goggles in shock and step away from your brand new 1000 Googolhertz system, but it's become a blur, a thousand metal joints twisting and snapping like some hyperactive transformer in the throes of a grand mal seizure. The disclaimer didn't say anything about this! You want to run, but it's too late. The computer stands on four skeletal circuit-board legs, wires sizzling, and reaches toward you with hungry silicon fingers....

The A.I. ate my baby

Well, let's hope not. But you have to admit, artificial intelligence gets a bad rap. From the science fiction masters to the popcorn movie moguls, or the eye-popping tabloid headlines we read in the checkout lane, the underlying message is the same: *if you build it, it will eat you*. Maybe it's because cutting edge science has always carried with it the stigma of "forbidden knowledge," but subtract fiction from fact, and the history of A.I. is actually quite tame.



Attack of the phallic symbols!!! Building A.I. in Operation Flashpoint.

Shrek, but he starts off by comparing A.I. to an onion. "We start with the innermost layer, and say 'If I had nothing better to do, what should I be doing?'" Brockington is the lead research scientist for *Neverwinter Nights*. He's talking about the denizens of a virtual world and toolset D&D fans have been dreaming of since TSR first released the infamous pencil and paper version in 1974.

"After we've handled what each creature should be doing when no else is around, we handle the middle layer, which is what groups of creatures should do when they see a player," says Brockington. This would be the layer responsible for the pack of rabid mind flayers that turns your gray matter to jelly-o if you go traipsing into some garden variety Dungeon of Doom. We have all damned this layer to hell at one point or another.

"At the outermost layer, we get to each specific creature," explains Brockington. "Why has the creature been placed into the module? Is it there to give you a quest? Is it there to help you by giving you the purple feather, or lead you through a locked door? Whatever actions this

specific creature must undertake to relate the story you want to tell takes place at this level." In other words, this is where Montezuma the Odious pulls you aside and threatens to cast "Montezuma's Revenge" on your party if you don't play nice and

Simulacra

In 1946, British mathematician Alan M. Turing converted a World War II code-breaking machine into the world's first computerized chess player. Turing, a renowned innovator in the field of early computer science, believed that machines would someday be capable of thought. As part of his research, he devised a process known as the Turing Test. During the test, a human interviewer (in a separate room) asks a series of questions randomly directed toward a computer or a person. Based on the answers, the interviewer has to decide which of the two has sufficiently answered the questions. If the interviewer is unable to distinguish between them, the computer is deemed "intelligent." In other words, if it walks and talks like a duck—it's a freaky mutant talking duck from another dimension, but you get the point: measure a good A.I. by its ability to snow you.

After chess, Turing tackled less complex games like checkers and tic-tac-toe, but the hunt was on for an A.I. that could match the power and capacity of the human brain. In 1997 Gary Kasparov squared off with IBM's monster machine, Deep Blue. In the six-game match, Deep Blue shocked the world by defeating the planet's most formidable chess player 3.5 to 2.5. It was a landmark achievement, and a media event that changed the public's assessment of A.I. forever.

It's ironic that what started with chess in 1946 in a sense came full circle with the same game in 1997. It should come as no surprise, then, that computer entertainment pulls double duty at the forefront of advanced A.I. design. The last thirty years have seen the rudimentary techniques of Nolan Bushnell's *Pong* and Taito's *Space Invaders* evolve into the complex virtual worlds of games like *Black and White* and *Operation Flashpoint*. The magnitude of the change is enormous.

Like onions, not cakes

BioWare's Mark Brockington doesn't actually look like

FedEx a Girdle of Fertility to his pal Jimmy the Impotent two towns over.

Brockington's model is an outline for A.I. development in any genre, one where design moves from the general to the specific. "How thick each of these layers are, is wholly dependent on the generality of the A.I.," he notes. "A well-designed A.I. limits the number of things that you should have to do at the outermost layer." But there are challenges to making this work in, say, a turn-based strategy game vs. a first-person shooter, or a role-playing game vs. basic chess. Each genre has to work within its unique limitations.

Your cheating heart

Soren Johnson is the lead A.I. developer for *Civilization III*. Firaxis' retrofit of the classic series. "The unique challenge facing turn-based A.I.'s is that they have no inherent advantage over the human player," he says. "In a real-time game, the A.I. has an advantage because it can control all units at all times while a human can control at most one unit or one group of units. In turn-based games, the A.I. is literally playing the same game as the human since it can only move its units and make its decision as often as the user can—exactly once per turn."

In essence, the A.I. "cheats" to present a reasonable challenge. Part of this is due to lack of development time and financing, but Johnson sees a more fundamental issue. "First, we need to answer the question of whether we want the computer to actually behave like a human," says Johnson. "A number of the strategies that humans employed against the A.I. in *Civilization II* could be politely categorized as annoying but effective." He

A.I. landscape map, or is it really Codemasters' secret project: Operation Concentration?



says they wouldn't want the A.I. pursuing perverted strategies that take advantage of exploits and loopholes. "Taken to an absurd extreme, if the computer really behaved like a human, it might intentionally crash the machine to make sure it didn't lose."

But what about a future filled with supercomputers that fit in your pocket? Can't we eventually build a challenging A.I. that won't need to cheat? "Building an A.I. capable of challenging the best human opponents without cheating is certainly possible today," explains Johnson. "The bottleneck for games as complex as *Civilization III* is development time and good A.I. programmers, not processor power and extra memory. If the game design for a *Civilization* was firmly established at the beginning of the project and if we had a team of five or six world-class programmers dedicated solely to A.I., the computer might be capable of challenging the world's best players without cheating."

Stepping out of turn

If there's a genre at the opposite end of the spectrum from the turn-based game, it's the first-person shooter. Ondrej Spanel and Jiri Martinek are programmers for Bohemia Interactive Studios in Prague, Czech Republic. They're responsible for the A.I. behind Codemasters' *Operation Flashpoint*—last year's critically acclaimed first-person tactical military shooter. According to Martinek, the question is actually not an issue of genre. "There's only good or bad A.I. in games," explains Martinek. "The primary issues that developers have to resolve remain the same. We never wanted to be limited by the boundaries of conventional gaming genres. *Operation Flashpoint* is a first-person game, but it's also got action, strategy, and simulation elements."

What Martinek is getting at is the genre convergence taking place as games and game A.I.'s become more sophisticated. Even now, a strategy game like *Civilization III* is easily distinguishable from a first-person game like *Quake III*, but as bleeding edge stock technology cuts down on development time and genres merge in virtual worlds, we'll see more hybrid games that combine aspects of multiple genres. In the meantime, *Operation Flashpoint* is already pushing convergent A.I. technology of its own.

"One thing we are particularly proud of is our 'spotting model,'" says Spanel. "It considers an object's size and camouflage, so you are much more visible in open areas than near trees." Pretty impressive on its own when you consider that the game is modeling an exclusively external environment with varying terrain and gradation, but also a little intimidating when you realize this means "just running your tail off" won't save you from a pack of sharp shooting grunts.

"Our A.I. model also includes picking up on indirect clues," says Spanel. "For example, if a patrolling unit hears shooting or sees another unit get killed, it knows there must be an enemy near and starts reacting. First it lies down to be safe, then looks around and searches for the intruder. This includes the ability to cue off both audio and visual detection, and is affected by parameters like experience, equipment, light conditions, and the number of obstacles between observer and target. We introduced various delays, hand trembling, and observation errors to simulate every single limitation that we could think of human soldiers having."

Building a believable world

Role-playing games have had the toughest job on the block when you think about it—at least in theory. Where else do you look for a comprehensive living, breathing world? "Players of role-playing games have a certain expectation of realism unrivaled by players in any other genre," says Greg Zeschuk, Joint CEO of BioWare. "The more real a role-playing game is, the better the player perceives it to be." But even here, Zeschuk conjures the rule of appearances. "Our primary task is to make the world look real, not to simulate a real world."

Making a world look real is a mix of complex but sometimes surprisingly straight-



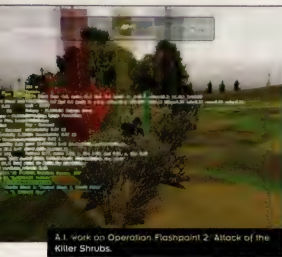
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ward coding. "The internal interactions in most games are complex, but likely less complex than most players expect," says Zeschuk. "I suspect that they perceive the game A.I. they're interacting with is doing all kinds of high level decision making when in reality it's picking from a few different options based on very limited inputs. My favorite example was a character that would always avoid players by running behind obstacles. When the player ran toward the character it would run around the other side of the obstacle. We had lots of fun trying to catch him (we're easily impressed), but the experience seemed quite real. In reality we created a simple system where the character would do a line of sight check and if he saw the player he would find a spot where the check would fail and then move there as fast as he could. The result was a hilarious game of cat and mouse with just a few lines of code."

In the future

A hundred years from now, we'll probably find that Hollywood had an overactive imagination. Evil people-eating machines won't take over the planet, turn us into gooey batteries, drive us to the molten core of the earth, or churn out hunter-killer robots with a penchant for one-liners. "Computers are just as dumb as they've always been," says Soren Johnson. "Today, they're just faster. Artificial intelligence comes from humans, not computers. Thus, the danger also comes from humans, not computers. If a government agency was short-sighted enough to put an unpredictable A.I. in charge of launching a nuclear weapon, any tragic outcome would result from a poor human decision, not some renegade A.I."

Let's hope that never happens, but in the meantime, it's pretty safe to assume science reality won't put "Ah-nuld" and his posse out of a job anytime soon. ●



You might need the advisor, but the computer doesn't.



**SPOTLIGHT
REVIEW:**

USER RATING

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Connectivity	★★★★★
Ease of Use	★★★★★
Reliability	★★★★★
Support	★★★★★

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Game With God

Designers help us explore religion and spirituality in gaming

by Andrew S. Bub

Theologian Paul Tillich once noted that religion is the substance of culture, which isn't a controversial statement when you consider the impact religion and spirituality has upon the faithful in all cultures. They even reverberate through the secular world, reflected in art, music, architecture, and indeed, most media, even computer games—often with great benefits.

"Games that treat religion realistically, weaving it into the game as it is woven into people's lives, can provide a richer and more realistic simulation," says Richard Garriott, the creator of *Ultima*. "Spirituality lends the game world credibility and completeness. The search for meaning in life is universal, and a shallower life of conflict and treasure collecting will never match the strength of a game that includes ethical or spiritual underpinnings."

While religion and spirituality add a lot to a game world, they're rarely used effectively. "I don't think there are any games that treat religion at anything more than a superficial level," says *Civilization* creator Sid Meier.

"Religion is ignored in gaming," says PopTop Software's Phil Steinmeyer, noting that if it is portrayed, it's often wildly caricatured.

Action, Adventure, and the playing of Roles

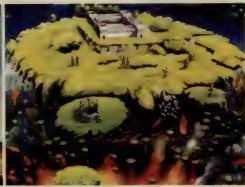
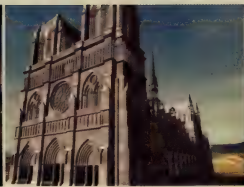
Role-playing games traditionally avoid using established religions in favor of using mythological gods and goddesses. A typical computer RPG often features Priest characters, but they usually function merely as medics and healers. They don't preach, or further any religious end, they instead act as a medieval triage team. One exception is *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, which feature gameworlds where Hell is an actual destination and defeating a "devilish" character is the ultimate goal. The *Diablo* universe also features Old Testament angels, like Tyrael, who provide a stark counterpoint to the evil you're fighting. Few secular games feature both a satanic underworld and also imply that its heavenly opposite exists. Implying a Christian paradise in *Diablo*'s world helps put the evil of its villain into sharper perspective.

But there's an absence of spirituality and morality to even *Diablo*. "The good guys often kill and loot indiscriminately on their path to the evil bad guy," notes Garriott, who received a lot of fan mail from his early *Ultima* games, many of which were from, in his words, "religious extremists protesting the very idea of role-playing games." Garriott didn't dismiss these letters; instead they made him think about the content of his games, and more importantly, the context of his game world.

The result was *Ultima IV: The Quest of the Avatar*, a game that used a series of ethical questions to determine your character class, and then thrust you into a world that offered a great deal of freedom. There were monsters to slay, treasures to take, and quests to perform, but behind the scenes the game tracked your worthiness based on eight virtues. If you ran from a battle you would lose Valor, for example. Lie to characters and your Honesty would suffer. The result was a game that had no traditional villain. It had monsters and quests, but behind the scenes it had a code of ethics to live up to. The goal was perfection, to become the Avatar for Garriott's imaginary world. This internal and highly moral quest for virtue and redemption became the theme of all the *Ultima* games that followed.

Strategy, Sociology, and History

Adventure games typically use religion as the historical and supernatural backdrop needed for such a story-driven genre. Arguably, no one has used early Christian history, myth and iconography better than Jane Jensen in her *Gabriel Knight* series. She claims this wasn't intentional, "I chose a paranormal detective theme for [the] series. The religious element has just developed naturally as part of that theme." Sometimes adventure games use it as a story device, like the Cult of the Hammerites in *Thief: The Dark Project*. The cult and its churches make the supernatural element easier to swallow, and the zealotry of the faithful increases the tension in the game. While the full extent of *Vampire: The Masquerade-Redemption*'s spiritual thrust was that it cast a nun as your vampire character's main love interest. The game uses the Adam and Eve "corruption of innocence" motif, as a simple, melodramatic story



Day 3, 12pm - 3pm

rent standards and haven't enjoyed a very positive critical reception, but they feature less violence (enemies dissipate into light, rather than explode into bloody chunks), offer much better motives for you to fight the forces of Hell, and they even reward players with Biblical lessons and scripture. N'Lightning's games have reportedly sold well, but only within the Christian market. They haven't yet captured the imagination and attention of the secular audience. Also, a company called Astrolab has made a few Islamic advent/adventure games (they appear to be heavily based on trivia and religious lessons).

Revelations to Come

It's easiest to find religious references in the strategy genre. Here religion is presented as historical context, or it's incorporated into the gameworld to function as Karl Marx put it, as "an opiate for the masses."

"Civilization treats the development of religion as a cultural advance, which brings benefits primarily in the area of the happiness of your population and their loyalty to your culture," explains Meier. A Cathedral, in *Civilization III*, has the dual effect of fulfilling your people's needs and impressing your neighbors. These ideas simplify religion's effect on real-world culture into a game play mechanism, but one that's meaningful throughout the game because it plays into your decision-making. Do you build more weapons? Or do you placate your populace with entertainment or religious achievements?

Real-time strategy games like *Empire Earth* or *Age of Empires* take an even more superficial approach. Priests can perform miracles and function as healers, and they can even convert enemy units to your side. *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* also uses religion as a historical backdrop for the campaigns featuring Frederick



"Games that treat religion realistically, weaving it into the game as it is woven into people's lives, can provide a richer and more realistic simulation."

—Richard Garriott

device yet never exploits it fully.

Action games tend to treat religious or spiritual concepts casually, as a backdrop, or setting, in games like *Doom*, and *Quake*, or in a light-hearted manner in games like *Requiem: Avenging Angel*, which featured an angelic protagonist complete with a Mohawk and a biker attitude. Sometimes they're used in a more potentially offensive manner like *Messiah's* wisecracking cherub and its morally bankrupt population of nuns and priests.

However, a few Christian shooters have recently materialized on store shelves to compete with the secular shooters. *The War in Heaven* (Valuesoft), *Catechumen*, and *Ominous Horizons: A Paladin's Calling* (from N'Lightning), all feature fairly primitive graphics by cur-

Barbarossa and the Muslim Emperor Saladin.

Peter Molyneux's ground breaking *Populous* games, and his more recent *Black & White*, are filled with religious and spiritual concepts. In both games you take the role of a god and have direct control over certain powers or miracles. The people, however, have a mind of their own. They can be swayed by your miracles, and you could guide them, but only to a point and only at the expense of your own powers. In *Populous* your power is derived from masses of worshipers. Neglect them and they would abandon you. In *Black & White* you could choose the kind of god you'd be, and even how kind or cruel your massive Creature (an animistic avatar) would be. You could be evil or good. Shades of gray are available as well, making *Black & White* the most successful game at capturing a sense of moral free will. The similarities to existing organized religions are intentionally shallow, however. "We had to avoid any reference to any existing religions but if you examine the many religions of the world you find that many of them have similar concepts



and beliefs," explains Molyneux.

SimCity and *Tropico* also feature religious structures that affect how people feel. But the two games, while similar, take completely different approaches. In *SimCity* churches are built by the sims (not the player) near their residential areas, while in *Tropico*, religion is a faction you must appease with churches, cathedrals, and the hiring of priests. Both games offer different consequences for ignoring religion. "You have the option of going the opposite way and ignoring or suppressing religion," says Steinmeyer. "This can be a successful strategy in *Tropico*, as it has been in real life for [Fidel] Castro, who has been in power for 40 years, suppressing religion for most of that time." *Tropico* is about pleasing segments of your population, and the religious faction is a crucial segment, while *SimCity* asks you to leave your citizens to fulfill their own spiritual needs.

Then there's *The Sims*, a game billed as a "life-simulator", but the lives it simulates are bereft of both religion and spirituality. As this magazine's Editor-in-Chief Steve Bauman noted in his review of the game "The Sims of the game are essentially a Godless race that worships capitalism alone." The sim-people derive joy, comfort, and entertainment from objects. Could they not meditate or pray instead, and derive the same benefits? "The Sims is lacking religion for the same reasons that *SimCity* lacks any references to race," explains Wright. "How do we represent this subject without offending too many people and who are we offending by leav-



"I don't think there are any games that treat religion at anything more than a superficial level."

—Sid Meier

ing it out?" Wright says they decided to leave it up to players to fill this part of the game through user-created content. Upon investigation, however, there seemed to be no custom content addressing this, which could imply a lack of demand on the part of consumers.

"Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" Proverbs 23:18 While using religion can improve a game, there's a significant amount of risk involved. "Obviously it's a sensitive area for a lot of folks and as a developer, you have to realize that there are a wide range of beliefs and practices," says Steinmeyer. "There's a lot of potential to offend if done improperly." Wright believes the main danger lies in misrepresenting or offending an entire belief system. "Most religions contain many fractured internal groups...[Protestant and Catholic Christians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims]" which, in his view, makes the risks of misrepresentation even greater.

But for some, the risks are worthwhile. "With *Ultima*, I created a simple ethical structure (the eight virtues)," says Garriott. "Over the last few years I've given a lot of thought to structuring one not just for gaming convenience, but rather one that I truly believe in. I think that will not only please me on a personal level, but will [also] make even more compelling storylines. Right now with my new game *Tabula Rasa*, we're debating how to manifest that within the game itself."

"We have a very ambitious plan for the *Black & White* series to take it right up to the modern day when in a lot of cultures, gods are not so significant," says Molyneux. "The idea of playing an all powerful being is something that I find totally amazing and is certainly a theme we'll continue with in future games."

Jensen has retired from making games recently, instead concentrating on her career as a novelist. This retirement may not be permanent: "I hope to make another game at some point. I'm very interested in the Victorian era Spiritualist craze—rapping tables, 'ectoplasm,' etc."

Steinmeyer notes that PopTop doesn't have any projects like this in mind but he can imagine a strategy game involving how missionaries spread, or attempted to spread Christianity to the non-European world. "[Or how] other religions, like Islam, have also spread themselves with methods quite different from Christianity."

"I've been thinking that a game based on the travels, letters, adventures, and influence of Paul in the first cen-

tury could be really interesting," says Meier, who hasn't started such a game. (Meier is referring to Saul, converted on the road to Damascus when struck by what he called a great light. Saul became Paul and went on to spread Christianity.) Perhaps such a game would mirror Paul's efforts (or The Prophet Muhammad's, or Gautama Buddha's), traveling from hard drive to hard drive, influencing gamers and developers alike, and changing the way they incorporate religious concepts in their games.

Or maybe some of these Christian themed developers, like N'Lightning, could break into other genres—creating the evangelical games their faithful want, but with game-play quality even secular gamers could enjoy. Or perhaps other churches, other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Bahá'í, Shinto, Sikhism, Jainism, Rastafarianism, or even other facets of Christianity will enter the market. Even if their gameplay trumps any evangelical goals, it will be interesting to see if gamers more accustomed to the existing treatments of religion would welcome such games.

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TECHNICALITIES

lean forward, lean back

Active involvement is the boon and bane of PC gaming

I really wish I could remember who first said it, but some years ago, in the days of that FMV dreck, games were being compared to Hollywood movies. A PC gaming luminary who thought too much of his own product said these video-laden games were inherently better than television or movies because they were a "lean-forward" experience, while that other stuff is "lean-back" entertainment. More recently, I've seen the occasional industry professional use this analogy to explain why PC games can't be shoehorned onto consoles, and vice versa. The point being that technical limitations are meaningless when deciding to which platform a game belongs. I like this application better, and I think it's a perfect descriptor of the philosophical difference between the average PC and console game.

When I say that PC games are "lean-forward," I mean they actively involve the participation of the players in a way that supercedes the strict game mechan-

downloading, and installing new levels or mods could even be handled from within the game interface. Imagine how popular this after-market content would be if the average buyer didn't have to magically stumble across it out on the web!

When I play a game like *Dark Age of Camelot*, I'm convinced that developers actually spend two or more years making a game and don't even bother to relegate a good chunk of time and budget to the means by which the people will interact with it. How could a couple dozen people spend so many thousands of hours on a product without having at least a couple of them actually study interface design? It's not like there

aren't plenty of good books on the subject. Still, the interface in most PC games is cluttered, ugly, unintuitive, and requires the poor game to make far too many clicks (or jump all over the keyboard) to get something done. Console developers find wonderful ways for the same "keys" to do many different things, while PC game makers

just make a new button to click on or add another keystroke. A customizable interface is no excuse for the default to annoy people.

The lean-forward aspect of PC games is their greatest strength, because only on the PC can users become so involved in making the game their own, using it exactly as they want to and augmenting it so drastically. But developers rely too heavily on the lean-forward attitude of hardcore gamers, to the detriment of casual consumers. Getting the most out of a PC game requires a lot of "not playing the game" activity, and the first step toward reaching a much broader audience is eliminating as much of this as possible. One of the reasons consoles games are lean-back entertainment is because they're easier to own, and it doesn't have to be that way. If PC developers would only let us recline the chair a little. ●

“The “ship now, fix later” attitude is openly hostile toward customers, and will only serve to keep casual computer users from buying games.”

ics. PC games regularly feature a wealth of configuration options while console games are comparatively homogenous. But it goes so much further than that.

By virtue of our computers being multipurpose tools, PC games involve their owners in the creation and acquisition of new content. User-made levels, models, hacks, and mods abound. Even if most PC gamers don't get involved with making this stuff, most get involved with using them. You can spend a whole lot of time with your PC game while not playing it. This is the single strongest aspect of the PC games industry, and it will grow in the near future. Though the hyperbole-bound gaming press is quick to claim that one game or another will "save PC gaming," the truth is that PC gaming will be saved not by a single product, but by a wealth of user-created content that no console game can hope to match.

So the lean-forward aspect of PC games is generally a great thing, but it's taken for granted by developers who need to adopt a slightly more lean-back attitude toward game design, production, and support. The worst is patches. We've seen it time and again—games hit the shelves with patches already available. This pisses me off like you wouldn't believe. Obviously, the game was rushed to stores without an effort to make it as feature complete and bug-free as possible, because a patch has been issued before the public has had a chance to notice any problems. The "ship now, fix later" attitude is openly hostile toward customers, and will only serve to keep casual computer users from buying games. When a game inevitably does need a patch, how would regular users know? Are customers really expected to periodically wander around web pages just to see if maybe there's an update? If my operating system can download updates automatically, games can, too. Finding,

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Do you know how fast you were going?—If you've ever wondered exactly how fast your Internet connection is, try these websites: bandwidthplace.com/speedtest/; www.2wire.com/services/bwn.html; webservices.cnet.com/bandwidth/; www.dsireports.com/speedtest

Q • Is it possible, and would it be a good idea, if I assemble a dual processor computer with everything in the motherboard to the max? For example, get as much RAM as can fit in there, high-end graphics and sound cards, and a DSL modem. Also the mother could have two Pentium 4 processors at 2.0GHz each, so you get 4.0GHz, and connect two hard drives in there, is this even possible? Would it be a good investment? An ultimate gaming machine?

Fernando G.

A • When you run a machine with two 2GHz processors, it doesn't make 4GHz. It's just a computer with two 2GHz processors in it. If your operating system and the game you're playing don't actually support dual processors, it will only use one and you'll not get any benefit. Even if you are running an OS that supports dual processor systems (Windows 2000 or Windows XP Professional), it won't run anywhere near twice as fast. It's definitely not worth investing in dual processors for games, as very few games are made to take advantage of it.

In terms of making good use of your money, you're much better off just getting one fast processor, a lot of RAM (at least 512 MB), a really fast graphics card (only one, as two won't make anything go any faster), and one fast hard drive.

Q • I have a HP 8370 with 350MHz, 64MB RAM, and a Rage Turbo Pro X2. My question is, I got Delta Force: Land Warrior and it requires a minimum 450 MHz Pentium or higher, 64MB RAM, and a higher capacity 3D Graphics Card. Why am I able to play this game with no lag and no problems?

Matt W.

A • What you consider "no lag and no problems" may be intolerably slow and choppy to someone else. Granted, the fact that you're way below the system requirements doesn't mean that the internet code is going to run poorly, so online play might work just as well as if you had a screamin' fast 2GHz machine. But I would bet that many PC gamers would find the frame rate you get in that game intolerable (or the details you have to turn off to make it playable too much of a sacrifice).

But you bring up a good point: everybody has a different perception of what is smooth and fast enough to be fun. All that's important is that you're having a good time.

Q • When I was using Powerstrip and looking at my graphics card hardware options, I saw the "AGP Transfer mechanism." Under it, it shows Disabled, DMA, and DIME. Right now, it has DMA checked. What is DIME, and DMA, and which is faster or better?

Ryan B.

A • Good question. Those AGP settings can be pretty obtuse. When AGP was first invented, it was really expensive for graphics cards to have a lot of memory on them, so part of the AGP spec includes what they call "Direct Memory Execute" mode—that's what DIME stands for. Normally, when the graphics card needs a texture for the game, it copies it from the system RAM to the video card's local memory. DIME allowed video cards to access textures directly from main system RAM, and only use the video card's memory for storing the pixels that are drawn to the screen (called the frame buffer). In addition, video cards could only access those

parts of a texture that were actually used in the scene, instead of the whole thing.

This was great in theory, but by the time AGP caught on, it was cheap to put a good 16 MB or more right on the graphics card, and the memory speed of graphics cards far outstrips that of an AGP bus. So it was much faster overall to revert to the old method of just copying all the textures from system RAM over to the video card's memory. DMA mode does just that—it stands for Direct Memory Access and simply means that the AGP card has direct access to system RAM without needing the processor's intervention. With DMA enabled, your AGP slot basically just acts like a really fast PCI slot.

You probably wouldn't notice any difference in performance if you checked DIME or DMA, but if you're curious, DIME is the faster and more advanced mode. Most modern video cards won't even use the Direct Memory Execute feature (even with DIME enabled), but it shouldn't run any slower for having that box checked.

Q • I have a GeForce 2 on my system, and I have noticed a performance decrease in some games (notably Baldur's Gate II) over an Intel i810 (OEM video chip), probably the worst gaming chip ever devised. Is there a solution out there?

Caldeb D.

A • Baldur's Gate II is a 2D game, and it just might be that an i810 graphics chip runs the specific 2D graphics routines that BG2 uses faster than a GeForce 2. Make sure you have the latest GeForce 2 drivers, though (check www.nvidia.com).

TECHBYTES

That's a lot of Hertz — IBM recently announced that it has built the world's fastest microcircuit, running at a whopping 110GHz. That's not a typo. It's built using an advanced silicon-germanium process and it won't be available commercially until sometime around the end of the year. But don't get excited about the idea of a 110GHz home computer, as this is definitely not an x86 processor like an Athlon or Pentium. In fact, it's not even a processor yet, just a functioning circuit. Processors built using the process will be made later this year, and they'll be targeted toward things like big expensive routers and whatnot, which use chips that are much less complex than, say, a Pentium 4, but need to run at extremely fast frequencies. Still, it just goes to show the capabilities of the silicon-germanium process, and these things have a way of trickling down into our desktop computers over time.

Hammer time — AMD recently showed off its upcoming 64-bit processor line, code-named "Hammer," already up and running. Though the processor isn't due for release until the end of the year, they already have their first working chips and were able to demonstrate two Hammer-powered PCs, one demonstrating full backwards compatibility by running 32-bit Windows XP, and one showing its 64-bit nature by running a special 64-bit version of Linux. Interestingly, the Linux machine actually had both 32 and 64-bit programs running at the same time. There's still a lot of work left to do with Hammer, as the chip is debugged and tuned to its final clock frequency and the supporting motherboard chipset is tested and optimized, but the demonstration proves that they're on track for a late-year release.

Meanwhile, over at Intel — At the Intel Developers Forum, the chip giant demonstrated a concept PC for the year 2030. Powered by the next-generation version of the Pentium 4, code-named Prescott, it should run at about 4GHz. The concept PC comes in a much smaller case, featuring some new innovations like a much smaller power supply and more efficient cooling. But best of all, the PC is truly legacy-free. It has no parallel or serial ports, and uses Serial ATA hard drives and optical drives, eight USB 2.0 ports, built-in wireless networking, and an internal flash memory-based reader. Such a PC won't be available until the second half of next year, but it's exciting to see Intel moving the platform in this direction, to the point of having functioning concept PCs already.



External Audigy

The Sound Blaster Extigy is the world's best only USB sound card

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
www.soundblaster.com **MRSP** \$149

Laptop sound has come a long way, but while it no longer makes your ears bleed, the sound capabilities of a typical desktop system still puts your mobile PC to shame. It's a real deficiency, seeing as how laptops are now so powerful in virtually all other areas. If you're one of those "laptop as a desktop replace-

surround sound output, support for EAX and EAX 2, etc. All that's missing are a couple of sound-morphing features you're unlikely to miss. It has a plethora of hookups, including three 1/8" stereo output jacks for your 5.1 speaker set, MIDI in and out, headphone jack, microphone jack, coaxial SPDIF input, and optical AC3 output and input plugs. In fact, it does AC3 decoding completely in hardware, to the point where you can plug in a DVD player, Xbox, or PS2 via the optical connection and output true Dolby Digital 5.1 without even having the Extigy hooked up to a computer.

With a simple USB connection as the only link to your PC or laptop, you'd think there wouldn't be enough bandwidth to handle multi-channel audio. But the Extigy plays back music files and video DVDs just fine. It sounds about the same as an Audigy, and while CPU utilization is a lot higher than normal, it's not enough to screw up DVD playback. The problems start when you fire up a few games. It's miraculous enough that Creative managed to find a way to cram simple two-channel music or even six-channel DVD audio over a USB cable; unfortunately, eight or sixteen channels for a game are just too much to ask. As a result, using the Extigy with games can result in wildly varying performance depending on the game played. The speed penalty in strategy and most role-playing

games is modest enough not to be noticed, but games like *Unreal Tournament* demonstrate more chop than Hong Kong Phooey. Fast-action games with lots of sounds playing at once just choke up the whole system, and while the Extigy doesn't start skipping or dropping sounds, the frequent frame-rate stuttering just isn't worth the improved audio quality.

As a result, it's hard to recommend the Extigy to gamers. If you use a laptop as a desktop replacement you will probably find a use for it, assuming you have a place to leave it permanently attached to a set of speakers. You wouldn't want to take the Extigy on the road unless you're running a presentation that requires a multi-speaker arrangement or extreme audio fidelity. If performance suffers too much on a particular game, you can always just pull out the USB plug.

Unfortunately, that's the limit of the Extigy's market—laptop users with a "home base" to leave a speaker set hooked up. The expansive set of hookups and incredibly easy installation (just plug it in) seem to make it attractive to even desktop gamers, but it's not worth the performance hit just to avoid installing a PCI card.

The Extigy is a product ahead of its time. A USB 2.0 version would probably have enough bandwidth to operate with only a negligible drop in performance in all situations, but USB 2.0 won't be standard fare for another year or two. This is about as good as a USB sound card could possibly be right now, but for most gamers, that's not good enough. ●



ment" users, you have to plug in headphones or external speakers to get decent sound, and you can forget about multi-channel 3D stuff.

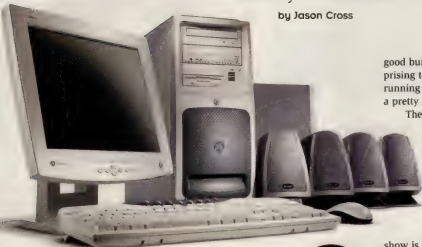
Enter Creative Labs' Extigy, a clever external version of the Sound Blaster Audigy. In simplest terms, it's an Audigy that sits in a sleek black box and connects to your system via a USB port. It has virtually everything you get from its PCI card brother, including incredibly clear 24-bit, 96 KHz sound, full 5.1

UPSIDE	Awesome sound fidelity and multi-channel audio for laptops
DOWNSIDE	Performance suffers, particularly in fast-action games
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Play Games, Clear Desk Space

Gateway's 700XL has it all—almost

by Jason Cross



MANUFACTURER Gateway (www.gateway.com)
MRSP \$3359



If you read the roundup of \$1000 gaming PCs in the March issue, you probably think Gateway can't make a decent rig for power-hungry gamers. Not so. They just can't do it on the cheap. Their highest-end home computer, the 700XL, is a beast of a machine. It's loaded down with high-end equipment and has enough amenities to almost make the \$3359 price palatable. Gateway has managed to really put together a sweet machine.

They started with the fastest CPU available right now, a 2.2GHz Pentium 4, the improved "Northwood" variety with more cache. Then they loaded it up with a full gigabyte of RDRAM and the fastest video card money can buy, a GeForce 4 Ti 4600. Add on a massive 120GB hard drive, and you have one smokin' machine. Of course, you'll need that much disk space for all the video editing you'll do, what with the three 1394 FireWire ports, one of them mounted in the front, and the Panasonic DVD-RAM drive. That's right, you can burn your own DVDs, or just back up 4.7 gigs of "shared" MP3s to a single disc, while the bundled VideoWave 5 software handles video editing duties admirably.

You'll want to burn CDs as well, naturally, and the zippy CD-RW drive makes that no sweat. Gateway includes both the shareware version of MusicMatch Jukebox and Easy CD Creator 5 for audio and data CD burning. Not enough bundled software? How about Office XP Small Business Edition, WinDVD, AOL, and Norton Antivirus? It's a pretty

good bundle, and with all the pre-installed software, it's pleasantly surprising to find only Norton Antivirus and the Gateway keyboard app running in the system tray upon boot-up. All things considered, that's a pretty clean software arrangement.

The same can't really be said of the machine's internals; the cabling job isn't bad enough to be a problem, but it is a bit messy and it's hard to get at the RAM with the power cords stretched out all over the place. It's a very quiet PC, though, with no case fan at all, just one on the power supply and one on the processor. And the connection options are fantastic. There are two 1394 ports on the back and one in the front, plus two USB 2.0 ports in front, two in back, and two USB 1.1 ports in the back.

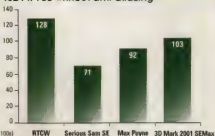
The powerful guts are not so scoff at, but the star of this show is the 18" flat panel LCD monitor. It has a hair more viewable area than a regular 19" tube monitor, and it's bright, crisp, and makes your desktop positively shine with vibrant color. When you're using it for non-gaming applications, it looks good enough to make you want to put your foot through every CRT you see. But then you fire up a game, and realize that if anything moves across the screen at a fast pace, it's blur city. This isn't a problem restricted to Gateway's LCD monitor; in fact all LCD monitors feature response times that make them exhibit smeared images when things move quickly. If all you play are strategy games and wargames, you'll have no problem here. If anything you do with your PC involves fast-action 3D (or 2D for that matter), you're better off with a regular old desk-dominating CRT monitor. Which, by the way, will shave \$300-400 off the price.

Despite reservations about the monitor, it's hard not to love this PC. Some may say they have everything, but this one throws in the proverbial kitchen sink, including a bevy of ports and connectors, CD and DVD burning, video editing, LCD monitor, you name it. The monitor isn't a good choice for gaming, and even if you swap it for a cheaper CRT you're still looking at blowing three grand. That's a lot of cash, but you get what you pay for. ●

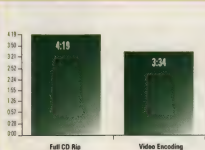
UPSIDE	Incredibly fast and powerful with a nice LCD screen
DOWNSIDE	Very expensive, and the LCD screen becomes a blurry mess in fast-action games.
RATING	★★★★★

3D PERFORMANCE

1024 x 768 without anti-aliasing



MEDIA ENCODING



THE SPECS

CPU: Pentium 4 2.2 GHz
RAM: 1GB RDRAM
Video: GeForce 4 Ti 4600
Sound: Sound Blaster Live! Value
Hard disk: 120 GB Western Digital 7200 RPM
Monitor: Gateway 18" LCD flat-panel
DVD: Panasonic DVD-RAM
CD: Lite-on 24X/10X/40X CD-RW
Network: 10/100 Ethernet, 56k modem



With the Mammoth Tank, you can provide a warm welcome for Nod transport helicopters.

RATINGS

Extraordinary	★★★★★
Excellent	★★★★☆
Maybe	★★★☆☆
Mediocre	★★★☆☆
Contemptible	★★☆☆☆

Command & Conquer: Renegade

Pass the popcorn and check your brain at the door

by Benjamin E. Sones



GENRE Action **DEVELOPER** Westwood Studios
[westwood.ea.com] **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts [www.ea.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 96MB RAM, 3D Accelerator
MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Mature

Here's a little *Command & Conquer: Renegade* quiz for you. You walk into a wide valley and discover a Nod base. A low wall flanked by gun turrets and manned by rocket soldiers encloses a sprawling compound that consists of an Obelisk of Light, a Hand of Nod, an airstrip, a Tiberium refinery, and several outbuildings. Three GDI tanks and nine GDI infantry are already attacking a Harvester that is busy mining Tiberium from a field in front of the compound. Transport aircraft are dropping in Nod reinforcements: a group of Flamethrower infantry, a Nod Buggy, and some mobile artillery. An attack helicopter has just taken off from the helipad in the compound and is making a beeline for the friendly troops. Do you A) search the ridge of the valley for a more favorable vantage so that you can engage the enemy on your terms; B) help the friendly troops destroy the Harvester to cut off the base's supply of precious Tiberium; or C) switch to your personal Ion Cannon so that you can... too late. The battle is over. You lost.

Renegade is not a game for people who like to think things through. It's for those who find *Quake III Arena* and *Serious Sam* too slow for their liking. It's a non-stop rollercoaster ride in a strange physics-less world where the rollercoaster never has to slow down to go uphill. It's a Saturday matinee popcorn movie starring Sylvester Stallone and/or Arnold Schwarzenegger (take your pick)—the kind of flick where the hero has to stop shooting every once in a while so that you can hear them say something clever. You'll have to eat your popcorn during the cut-scenes, though—best to keep your hands on the keyboard while the bullets are flying.

That's pretty much all the time. The game starts out at a manic pace and then cranks up the tempo. The opening mission is an attention-grabbing masterpiece that throws you (vis-à-vis Commando Nick "Havoc" Parker) into the fray to help a GDI convoy defend against a Nod

ambush and then take out an entire base... with the help of a satellite-based Ion Cannon. It's not very difficult (which is good), but it is very flashy (which is also good).

The next mission offers even more mayhem. GDI battleships and amphibious assault craft trade blows with turreted beach defenses. Helicopters and cargo planes drop airborne troops from above. Tanks and other assorted ground vehicles roll over hordes of infantry and, if you aren't careful, they roll over you. That sets the pace for the rest of the game, which will see you dodging tactical nuclear weapons in the streets of a war-torn city, trading bullets on the slopes of an active volcano, and razing various Nod bases one structure at a time. There is so much stuff going on around you that your eyes start to glaze over... whoops. You lost again.

No intelligent life here, Captain

Other missions do a less admirable job at playing to the game's strengths. The game can do indoor environments—you can go inside the various base structures to sabotage them, for instance. Ever wondered



Ion Cannon blasts are best viewed from a distance. >>> Hope you dressed for a nuclear winter.



what the inside of a Hand of Nod looks like?

Prolonged corridor romps are a mistake that the game makes a few times too often, however. Fighting room-to-room or (worse still) sneaking around reveals some of the game's more egregious flaws, not least of which is an enemy AI that could kindly be described as abysmal. On the open battlefield, where there is nowhere to hide and the average enemy soldier has a lifespan of 0.0253 seconds it's less noticeable. In close quarters, however, you can often befuddle the enemy with clever tactics such

as stepping around a corner or standing more than ten feet away. Enemies rarely react when you shoot their buddies. Sometimes they don't even react when you shoot them. Fortunately they make up for their lack of intelligence with abundant quantity. The extent to which this bothers you is proportional to your tolerance for popcorn movies. If you laugh and gun them down and forget about the whole incident a few seconds later, you are good to go. If you find yourself dwelling on it, take *First Blood* back to the video store and rent *Gallipoli* instead.

When it sticks to open terrain, the game delivers one of the best (or at least the most visceral) virtual battlefield experiences around. Where other games offer a scripted sequence here, another there, *Renegade* keeps the punches rolling. It does a better job than other games at hiding the fact that you are the only living actor in the game world. Here you feel like you are one piece in a bigger puzzle. Imagine being shot with a digi-

narrative, that's probably for the best.

The game's multiplayer mode is a bit less entertaining than you might expect. It's a good concept—a simple GDI versus Nod battle in which each side has a limited amount of time to either destroy the opposing base or plant a beacon (that will signal an Ion Cannon blast or a nuclear strike to destroy the opposing base). In the meantime you earn credits by killing enemy units and by protecting your Tiberium Harvester (each load of Tiberium that it brings back to your refinery puts money in your team's collective pockets). The nine maps are well designed and offer plenty of variety, and the game-play is somewhat reminiscent of *Tribes*.

It suffers a bit from the game's "one thing after another-



In close quarters, enemies sometimes miss little cues that something is amiss... such as the burning bodies of their friends, or the fact that you are standing directly in front of them. >>> Both the Tiberium Harvester and the refinery could have come straight from the real-time strategy game (word to the wise: it's not healthy to walk through Tiberium fields).



tizing ray that deposits you, *Tron*-style, into a *Tiberian Dawn* mission. Your commanding officer, Brigadier General Adam Locke, contacts you frequently to tell you what to do and when to do it. For all you know, he probably complains about your path-finding AI when you get lost. Perhaps you will feel more sympathetic the next time one of your own real-time strategy grunts takes the not-quite-shortest route between points A and B.

Citizen Kane It ain't

The story (for want of a better word) punctuates the action in a series of rendered and in-engine cut-scenes. It's all pretty standard stuff straight from the *Command & Conquer* canon: captured scientists that require rescuing, the evils of Tiberium, Kane running rampant. The voice acting is classic Westwood cheese, but it comes across better here than in other games, perhaps because it doesn't even try to take itself seriously. Havoc could give Stallone and Schwarzenegger lessons in swagger; he deals out one-liners and bullets with equal aplomb. After the fireworks of the opening battle, he strolls into a briefing with his superior officer and quips "Where's my medal?" In a later mission he runs into Sakura (his mercenary girlfriend-turned Nod flunky), who catches him by surprise and pulls a gun on him. "Miss me?" He asks sweetly. "Not at this range," she replies. Cue rimshot.

Mostly the story stays out of the way and lets you go about the business of shooting everything that moves. Given Westwood's track record in delivering meaningful

er" approach to design, however. The weapons in the single-player game aren't even vaguely balanced, and they are no more so here. You can buy more powerful characters (think classes), vehicles, and the all-important beacon, but nothing costs very much money and there are few drawbacks to buying the heavy guns, so many games quickly become a "Mammoth Tank versus Flame Tank" showdown. Then again, the tank rush is a staple in all the other *Command & Conquer* games, so why not here? The multiplayer mode does a great job preserving the game's atmosphere of sheer chaos, at least. Just look for servers with lots of players and don't expect a tactical tour-de-force.

The latter is good advice for the game as a whole, really. Stallone and Schwarzenegger deliver little more than adrenaline, bullets, and a trail of bloody corpses, after all. Just sit back, eat your popcorn, and enjoy the show.

UPSIDE

Amazingly fast action, great virtual battlefield, colorful *Command & Conquer* feel

DOWNSIDE

Amazingly awful AI, the frenetic pace can get tiring

RATING

★★★★☆

Star Trek: Bridge Commander

Engineering, reconfigure the rating system deflector arrays

by Dave Perkins



GENRE Star Trek Simulation **DEVELOPER** Totally Games (www.totallygames.com) **PUBLISHER** Activision (www.activision.com) **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone



Romulans have style. Klingons have honor, and Cardassians have lizard-skin neck flaps. Once enemies of the Federation, the first two races have become friends. Are the Cardassians simply too odious? Take the con and find out. They of the universally receding hairline are your primary foe in *Star Trek: Bridge Commander*, and by the time you complete the game, you will have sent hundreds of their number spinning into black space.

The game is aptly named, as you spend its entirety sitting in the captain's chair of a Federation starship. Pressed into duty when a planet explodes and kills the ship's old captain, you find yourself in the front lines of the Federation's attempts to discover the cause of said planet's demise. Your first assignment: beam Jean Luc Picard on board and deliver him to a distant station. Taking a seat beside you on the bridge, Picard mentors you through your first flight, advising you as you learn to maneuver your ship and use its weapons.

In this way, the tutorial slips seamlessly into the storyline, and by the time you drop Picard off at the station, his guidance has left you capable of captaining alone. Even better, the game smoothly connects mission to mission by briefly loading the necessary data during warp jumps between systems. The effect is that of a

It's possible, and often wise, to target subsystems on opposing capital ships or space stations >>> Some planets are large enough to be imposing, but none of the planets have very convincing textures >>> Admiral Liu, a spitting image of Michelle Yeoh, delivers the bad news: Revert to last save

twenty-hour long movie, unsullied by artificial breaks between episodes, interrupted only by your need to take a break.

Permanent red alert

The movie analogy extends further, in the sense that the plot is fixed, the script written, and your effect upon the game's flow almost entirely limited to how well you play your part. Fail an objective, and try again. Succeed, and move on. Your investigation into the planetary explosion will take you to dozens of systems and even more battles, but it tends to knock them down like a row of falling dominoes.

When the game does provide you with a chance to dictate what will happen next, it does so not via disruptive pop-up menus (you know the kind: "Please tell me more..." versus "Please eat my phaser..."), but via moments when two things must be done, but there's only time for one. One such moment occurs near the beginning of the game, when your decision to respond to a Klingon captain's request for a meeting precludes you from spying on some Cardassian freighters, and vice versa, and each choice leads to a different adventure.

Terrific voice acting, complemented by an excellent score (marred only by a few music loops which do not quite splice together), also adds to the cinematic quality. Patrick Stewart and Brent Spiner lend their voices to their characters, and it goes without saying that they do it well. The rest of the voice-actors perform with comparable skill. In fact, well over half of them have appeared at some point in the *Star Trek* series, and the rest have voice-acting credentials extending to both television and cinema.

If you compare the game to a movie, it has to be a war movie. Whatever diplomacy is involved in the story is out of your hands; what is in your hands is a lethal machine. For the bulk of the game, you captain a Sovereign class ship, which can go one-on-one with almost any enemy the universe has to offer. Starfleet Command takes care of steering you in their direction. Most



of your assignments take you to sectors where—if phasers aren't already humming off your shields before your warp-in animation finishes playing—you will only have a few moments of peace before you hear the whoosh of hostile impulse engines. Your duties as captain begin here.

Keep the phasers warm

From the bridge, the viewscreen shows the current target, the latest important event, or a visual communication from another ship. Using the mouse to glance around the bridge, you select crewmembers and issue orders to them via the snazzy interface. While from this viewpoint it is difficult to get a three-dimensional mental picture of the layout of the battle, your well-trained crew takes care of it for you. Each of them accomplishes all of the tasks you would expect them to, and each gives you advice upon request.

You may toggle from the bridge view to a tactical view, where you can choose between a couple of external views. In tactical view, the layout of a multi-ship battle is more evident, as it is possible to spin the camera in any direction to check out who sent those disruptor bolts thumping into your ventral shields.

Each view has its strengths and weaknesses, with the tactical view gaining the upper hand overall—thanks mainly to the sheer pleasure of watching torpedoes explode against glowing shields, phasers crisscross against the starry background, and crippled enemy starships begin to tumble lazily as they are torn apart by muffled explosions. Tactical view also affords you the chance to take both the helm and the weapon arrays yourself. Using the keyboard to steer and the mouse to fire (Can you imagine James Kirk holding a joystick? Do you want to?), you roll, spin, and change speeds in the attempt to bring your most fully-charged weapons to bear, while taking incoming torpedoes on the chins of your most intact shields.

A first rate cast

Picard and Data have lost a little weight since last we saw them—but that aside, their models are right on target, down to the circles under Picard's eyes. About two dozen crewmembers and supporting characters populate the game, and their clever modeling, along with great voice acting, makes them distinctly individual. The script gives personality to the characters as well; your First, for example, is ambitious and strict, while her opposite, the chief engineer, has a lighter side. Phrases like "graviton generators operating at twenty millicochranes" remind us that we are indeed inside the *Star Trek* universe.

The crewmembers at both helm and tactical do their jobs well enough that you can win the game entirely with their help. The AI that governs not only their behavior, but also that of your friends and enemies, is first rate. Most intriguing is how no AI in the game is perfect; for example, your tactical officer may fire a torpedo too early, or make a somewhat inefficient phaser run—but

this behavior adds to the realistic, human feel, and is wholly a strength of the game.

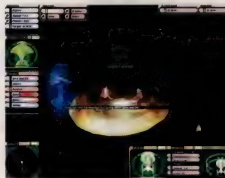
Built to specifications

The starships are not just pretty polygons with names like *Enterprise* and *Jonka* slapped on the sides, but models with the correct shield configurations and proper torpedo fittings, and with disruptor cannons and phasers pointing in the right directions. Devotees of the series will love testing these starships in battle, experiencing what they've seen only on screen, and debating the accuracy of the portrayal. A handful of multiplayer options allow up to eight players to engage in free-for-alls and two-team battles. None of these modes are particularly inspired, but the chance to fly all of the game's starships is available.

Ships whose shields have failed start showing burn marks and holes in the outer skin, and highly damaged ships may even lose chunks of hull. The glow of impulse engines, the twinkle of a starship's myriad windows, and especially the bridge environment—all have a clean, economical look that trekkies will love.

On the graphical flip side, the starry backdrop is strangely depthless—stars are all about the same distance apart, and their movements suggest not infinite space, but a velvet painting. Planets look like giant pool balls covered in felt. When characters talk, their lip animations exhibit no connection to the spoken words. These observations do not, however, cripple the game; and indeed they may stem from the priority the code places on providing the player with great-looking battles and highly competent AI.

If there's anything to hate about the game, it's the inability to save your game at will. The game's autosaves are spaced far apart enough to occasionally force you to replay not just one battle, but a sequence of two or three. But what's the difference? Apart from the script and plot, that's all the game really is: a long sequence of excellently presented battles. Replaying a couple of missions may be frustrating, but beating them leads you to even more. If you enjoy doing that, you'll be in *Star Trek* heaven.



[top] The graphics run the gamut from sweet ship models and nifty nebulae to flat starry backdrops and dull planets >>> Planetary atmospheres set off an orange glow around ships which wander too close

UPSIDE

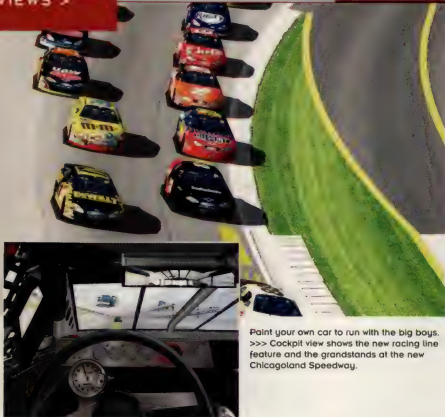
Cinematic qualities capture the feel of the *Trek* universe; outstanding AI allows you to truly command your ship

DOWNSIDE

Unremarkable multiplayer modes make replayability the only possible drawback: how many starship battles until you've had enough?

RATING

★★★★★



Point your own car to run with the big boys. >>> Cockpit view shows the new racing line feature and the grandstands at the new Chicagoland Speedway.

NASCAR Racing 2002 Season

The right step forward

by David J. Long



GENRE Racing **DEVELOPER** Papyrus Racing Games (www.papy.com)
PUBLISHER Sierra (www.sierra.com) **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 450, 64MB
 RAM, 3D accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-43; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

Last year's *NASCAR Racing 4* was a major step beyond previous NASCAR sims because it featured the 3D physics that first debuted in *Grand Prix Legends*. With *NASCAR Racing 2002 Season*, Papyrus has made enough progress to warrant a full priced release. Chief among the upgrades is an enhanced driving model that is easier to control. More importantly for new players, Papyrus seems to have finally realized that not everyone can become Jeff Gordon in a day and players might need a little driving help to enjoy the game.

You can learn all about stock cars and the tracks they race on through the new Driving Lessons. Retired Winston Cup star Darrell Waltrip takes you on a guided tour of each circuit in the game. He details each track through excellent slow motion instant replays that teach braking points, expected speeds and the little nuances of each speedway. Once you hop in the car, you can finally flip a switch to see the right racing line. Much like the setup in the excellent *Superbike 2001*, this overlay displays acceleration areas in one color and braking areas in another. The training videos—made with the same top-notch replay editing tools found in the game—along with the racing line, are invaluable to the new player. It's the sort of help that's been missing from Papyrus sims for years. Even for veterans, the visual cues the new racing line indicator gives will help trim lap times. Finally, if you can't get a handle on the simulation mode of play using all these new aids at your disposal, arcade mode provides a forgiving driving experience that lives up to the arcade moniker.

The simulation mode is tightened up considerably from *NASCAR Racing 4*. The cars simply seemed too loose in the last game but this time the feel seems more

correct. You can save sliding cars from disaster with just a little bit of work. This is welcome relief for those that tried and failed to get a handle on last year's game. Better audio cues also enhance your control. Even without the excellent force feedback available with the right controller, the improved sound combined with the onscreen action give you great insight into how your car is handling and what needs to be done to correct it. Step out of the car into one of the great replays and you'll hear an almost exact replica of the sound these cars make at speed. It's one of the little things that make the 2002 game stand above all the rest.

Computer driven cars have always been a tough spot for Papyrus sims, and this is the first time it's not an obvious problem. In fact, the game is clearly better than past attempts to simulate forty-three individual drivers. The AI is willing to concede spots better than before and it can also handle more rubbing than past versions without putting you in the fence. There are still times where the tunnel vision of other AI drivers will have you pounding the desk in disgust, but it's definitely a step in the right direction. You'll find most anomalous behavior during yellow flags and crashes including a nutty ability of your car to skate on its side for what seems like an eternity after being upended. Despite these minor gaffes, the overall single player racing experience is definitely among the best you can find.

Online racing is where this game shines, and you're missing out if you don't give it a go. It couldn't be easier to connect up with friends or to the Sierra network for a quick race. Plenty of servers are available through the in game browser and even modem players will find lots of open races to participate in. Warping is sometimes a problem, but the game generally performs incredibly well even with thirty drivers in one race. The wild world of the Internet often means you'll find varying levels of skill in these contests, but the majority of races are fair and exciting.

This wouldn't be a Papyrus sim without great graphics and *NASCAR Racing 2002 Season* certainly has those. An increase in texture size does wonders for the tracks and the cars. Just put this game side by side with last year's and the difference is obvious. One could argue that a lot of the tweaks to AI and physics could have been done in a patch for *NASCAR Racing 4*, but that means novice players wouldn't have access to all the excellent training materials included here. The easier to handle cars, learning tools, new graphics and audio improvements all congeal into a top notch stock car simulation that has yet to find an equal on the PC or any other platform.

UPSIDE

Improved graphics, sound, AI and car handling

DOWNSIDE

AI is still quirky and crash physics are sometimes flaky

RATING

★★★★★

Black & White Creature Isle

More disappointment from last year's most overrated game

by Steve Bauman



GENRE Babysitting Simulation **DEVELOPER** Lionhead Studios [www.lionhead.co.uk] **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts [www.ea.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Black & White **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

Black & White is certainly one of the more curious games in recent memory. Few have launched with such expectations and initial awe—the game's first hours/days remain incredibly impressive—only to have those first impressions collapse after exposing the tedium of the underlying game mechanics. Perhaps this is all a bit unfair, as nothing could have lived up to the expectations that awaited the original game, but almost everyone who praised it out of the gate eventually backpedaled upon reflection.

The *Creature Isle* expansion does attempt to address some of the game's (significant) deficiencies while adding a new area that focuses on its strength, the interaction with your creature. That particular aspect of the game is undeniably original and full of character, both literally and figuratively. The *Creature Isle* world has no opposing gods, eliminating the tedium of god-to-god combat. It presents you with a more open-ended game, allowing you to explore the island and its various quests at your leisure. There are a few villages you can (easily) take over, and doing so gives you access to spells you'll need later.

The object of the game is to gain the right to mate with Eve, a female creature. To accomplish this, you need to complete a set of creature-created trials after which you may join their brotherhood. Completing specific trials (which are basically the equivalent of the silver or gold scroll quests in the original game) gives you access to a creature's form. (For those that uninstalled the original game and didn't save your creature, you start off with an ape at square one of learning.)

Unfortunately, these "scroll quests" too often put you either in direct control of your creature, which is somewhat a violation of the game's basic "you're a god influencing and not controlling the world" ethos. Either that or you're doing some bizarre busywork that seems equally contrary to your godliness. For example, one quest has you launching a guy with a catapult/crossbow thing to get some healing herbs on distant (or not too distant) mountains. While amusing, you can normally pick anyone up at will, so what's the point? Other quests involve your creature, and while a few are oddly appealing (bowling against

a cow, for example), others are incredibly dull. Playing hide-and-seek (following an invisible wolf by tracking his footprints, wow), gardening, playing marbles, and herding sheep with your creature is far from entertaining (ooh, click a spot, now click again, the sheep move, click again, sheep move... repeat ad nauseum for all 10 sheep). It's all oddly retro, in gameplay terms, and seemingly designed more to show off the cleverness of the game's physics and AI more than to give you something actually interesting to do.

One quest that exists outside of the regular brotherhood trials involves finding and hatching an egg, which becomes Tyke, a baby creature. It follows you around learning from your creature, and while it proves initially interesting, the levels of frustration grow exponentially when you're trying to train a creature to train an even dumber creature.



(clockwise from top left) There are a couple of villages on the *Creature Isle* island you can take over—you'll need their spells to complete some of the trials. >>> Who put a bowling game in the middle of my god game? >>> There's nothing quite like dancing in your own feces to impress your tyke.

The add-on also includes all of the bug fixes and updates to the game that add features promised and not delivered in the original release. Going back to the original game, you still have to suffer through the unintermittent tutorial (as well as most cut scenes in the game, all of which become less and less clever after a few replays), and while most of the game's bugs have been addressed, it's just not as open-ended (and fun) as it seems like it should be. *Black & White* is an undeniably ambitious game that falls short of reaching its lofty goals. Even patched and with an add-on, it remains more worthy of your respect and admiration for what it attempts than for what it delivers.

UPSIDE	Focuses on the creature instead of god battles, lots of new quests
DOWNSIDE	Quests aren't particularly entertaining
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Asheron's Call: Dark Majesty

Their satanic majesties request...
and you might want to listen

by John Brandon



Left: Standing around casting spells at each other – now that's persistent multiplayer! >>> You won't see this in EverQuest – and the conversation was equally lewd.

GENRE Online Role-playing **DEVELOPER** Turbine Entertainment [www.turbineentertainment.com] **PUBLISHER** Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 333, 64 MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **ESRB** Teen

As one of the first massively multiplayer role-playing games, *Asheron's Call* became a critical success after its release in late 1998. Gamers enjoyed a detailed backstory, diverse locations, and ever-more-deadly and beguiling monsters. Monthly patches kept players searching for new objects and completing horrendously difficult quests, all in the interest of attaining high character levels and bragging rights at the local meeting hall. It was a blast to play, with gameplay that outshined *EverQuest*.

Unfortunately, its graphics have looked dated compared to strong competition, causing a population implosion in the land of Dereth and turning some remote villages into ghost towns. Servers that once housed several thousand players began to host only a few hundred. The writing was on the wall, but *Dark Majesty* might just be the spell that draws the original fan base back for more. Even for longtime fans, this expansion provides a unique and interesting experience quite different from the original mainland adventure, which is also included. Plus, at a budget price of only \$20, it makes an excellent entry-point for those who have hesitated to jump on the persistent world bandwagon.

Accessible only through mainland portals, the new Marae Lassel island hides small pockets of deadly enemies around an outer rim. Inside the mountain wall, players can quest for mysterious objects and lay claim to the most coveted possession of them all: Your very own virtual dwelling. *Dark Majesty* provides a way to purchase a lowly cottage, country villa, or sprawling mansion where you can store valuable treasures and hold private meetings with friends and fellowship members. Lag problems are almost non-existent in these hideaways, which are stored on separate servers.

The newly rendered monsters are quite stunning, considering the original graphics engine remains intact. Tumeroks are more textured, and the lumbering giant Eviscerator will send shivers down the spine of the most seasoned war mage. Canescent Mattekaras hide in the upper regions of the new island and drop pelts that can be converted into valuable robes. All the new enemies seem to react faster to assailants, too, instead of just standing idly like they do on the Dereth mainland.

Turbine Entertainment has worked diligently over the past few years to make *Asheron's Call* a balanced and richly detailed experience.

Monthly patches provide obscure uber-weapons, new mysterious objects that advance the storyline, and re-defined rules that help new characters and level the playing field appropriately. *Dark Majesty* is like one uber-patch with a new island, but it still doesn't correct some persistent problems. There are still lag problems especially on popular servers at the coolest locations. Also, while the basic gameplay elements are easy to grasp, it still takes months to understand the social order, how fellowships work, the countless proprietary terms, and how to follow a vague and under-enforced code of conduct.

During just a few hours of gameplay, you might see sexual banter, profanity, or down-right player coercion. For example, if you decide to become someone's vassal, you might find yourself abandoned in a horde of Olthoi. None of this "gameplay" is documented in the manual, and high-level players often scoff at dumb questions. Another unresolved problem is the lack of housing for every player. In fact, those who have met all the questing and monetary requirements are still not able to purchase houses, simply because they were not the next in line. Turbine has worked diligently to add 400 cottages, 90 villas, and 10 mansions just in the month of February. Players are still complaining, though, and some are leaving the game for this reason alone.

Even given some of these drawbacks, there's still no arguing with the fact that *Dark Majesty* is a technical marvel, providing a rich gameplay experience in a huge gameworld. Meeting people online, traveling together to defeat a terrible foe, and finding that one precious item that will make you the talk of the town are all compelling reasons to give this low-cost classic ground-breaker some serious re-consideration.

UPSIDE	Cheap, cheap, cheap
DOWNSIDE	Can take hundreds of hours to experience the best parts of the game
RATING	★★★★★



The evil mountainside! >>> What are these guys up to?

Star Wars: Starfighter

Welcome to Naboo: Episode 2

by Andrew S. Bub

GENRE Action **DEVELOPER** Secret Level [www.secretlevel.com] **PUBLISHER** LucasArts [www.lucasarts.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

Who didn't want to fill Luke Skywalker's shoes after seeing the Death Star battle in the original *Star Wars*? Fewer probably found themselves dreaming of portraying hyper-lucky moppet Anakin Skywalker in his less-than-epic battle against droid ships of the Trade Federation after watching *The Phantom Menace*, but if you did, here's your opportunity to live the dream.

Star Wars Starfighter takes place just prior to the Trade Federation blockade at the beginning of flick, and casts you first as a cocky Naboo fighter jock, then as a lady mercenary, and finally as hotshot alien pirate. Each character has his or her own ship, story, and goals. Admirably, the three storylines flow together at the end of the game toward a generally satisfying conclusion. There are fourteen missions all told, and they are varied and well designed. There are search and destroy missions, escort sorties, rescues, and all out interstellar combat on land, sea, outer space, and of course, in the obligatory *Star Wars* asteroid fields. As a bonus, you can unlock six additional missions during the game.

This is basically a sequel to last year's *Battle for Naboo*, and thus features the same arcade style gameplay. It's not to be confused with PC simulations like Larry Holland's *X-Wing* games, but it does have its own fly and blast, coin-op style appeal. You can play *Starfighter* in a third person view, or with



a cockpit, and happily the game improves over *Naboo* with simple wingman commands and optional goals, and does away with the limited arcade style "lives" concept still used in *Rogue Leader*. Otherwise the PC version is identical to the console ver-

sions of the game, with slightly better graphics (even better than the Xbox version) and joystick support. Regardless, though, the game's controls feel a bit slippery and unresponsive, with little sense of inertia or physics. Flying through space or a canyon, or skimming over the water all feel the same. The controls are simple: two fire buttons, one for blasters and the other for missiles or torpedoes, a brake, an accelerator, and a handy zoom button that makes it easy to pick off craft from far away. The latter button really changes the way you play the

game; it's sort of like playing a space simulation sniper.

Sadly, the heads-up display isn't much use. The radar is useless, and there's no list of objectives. Instead they provide an arrow, which points to your next target.

Worse, many of the missions feature unclear objectives and there isn't enough briefing to make it obvious what to do next. You can't call up objectives without pausing the game, and if one tiny thing goes wrong, you'll have to repeat the entire mission.

The graphics are clean and attractive, and a big step up from *Rogue Squadron* and *Naboo*. Everything looks bright and colorful, retaining *Episode One*'s brightly colored naturalistic look. The explosions are nice and enveloping, the fire engulfs your ship if you fly through it, and there's a lot of debris falling to the ground (when there is ground). The game handles both space and planetary textures well, with little to no fogging. Naturally the game sounds great, (it is a *Star Wars* game) and uses all the familiar sound effects from the sound of a blaster, frantic cries from wingmen, to the beep and whine of an R2 unit. And the music is straight from the flicks, relying perhaps a bit too much of *Episode I*'s "Duel of the Fates."

Starfighter isn't a bad game. It's a simple and effective action game in the *Episode I* setting, which means it's not as compelling as the games set in the regular *Star Wars* time frame. TIE Fighters and Stormtroopers make better foes than BattleDroids and whatever their ships are called, but it's still *Star Wars* and it's the closest a fan can get to *Rogue Leader* without buying a Gamecube.



Note the battledroid piloting the boat

UPSIDE	Action packed gameplay with good mission design
DOWNSIDE	Controls are a bit slippery
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Tropico: Paradise Island

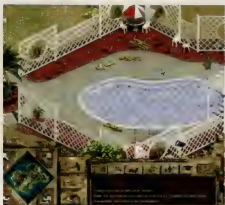
Presidenté, your people may be calling for an expansion this year!

by Jason Cross

GENRE Tropical strategy **DEVELOPER** Breakaway Games
[www.breakawaygames.com] **PUBLISHER** Gathering of Developers
[www.godgames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Tropico **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

Games like *Tropico* never go out of style. It's one of those strategy games where you control the environment but not the people in it, like *SimCity* or *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, but the subject matter (running a Banana Republic) and reliance on tourism and exports for virtually everything just doesn't sit well with some people. On this island, the choices you make can take a long time to pay off, and those that seek immediate gratification find it frustrating. The expansion, *Paradise Island*, doesn't change that. It won't make you like *Tropico* if you don't already. You'll still have to quell the occasional

rebellion, make your people happy enough to vote you back into office each year (or keep your military happy enough to put down dissenters when you decide not to have an election), build lovely tourist traps, and harvest enough exotic food or natural resources to ship off for money. *Paradise Island* just makes most of these activities a little more interesting, and in some cases, more viable.



New tourist types are fun, even if they aren't much different than the old ones. >>> The marina, miniature golf, condominium, and atrium. More buildings, more options.

It's about as straightforward as an expansion pack gets. There's just more of everything, and one or two minor interface tweaks. Fortunately Breakaway Games, best known for making *Sid Meier's Antietam!* and the *Cleopatra* expansion, adds just the right things in the just the right places, and in the process fixes some quibbles with the original game. It used to be incredibly tough to run a military dictatorship, eschewing elections and your people's happiness if that's the way you wanted to go. The expansion adds a military base, colonial fort dungeon, and a few nice edicts that make the whole martial government thing a lot more viable. Building nice housing for your better-paid Tropicans used to mean strewing lots of small houses all over the place, but a new condominium provides upscale mass-housing (and can even be converted to a time-share for tourists). A bunch of new tourist attractions like miniature golf, tennis courts, and charter boats give you more of an excuse to lean



Rotating buildings and faster construction mean you can actually build airports.

toward a tourism-based economy. The new spring break and eco-tourist types are fun, but don't really change the way you play.

The best changes are the little tweaks and fixes that simply make *Tropico* a little easier to get along with. You can rotate many buildings when you place them, and construction workers work more efficiently, particularly when it comes to leveling out land. As a result, what you build has more to do with your strategy and less to do with finding a forgiving spot of geography. You can finally see the voting estimate before you decide to allow an election or not, and you can change your mind before Election Day by issuing a Martial Law edict. But not all changes are welcome. New random events cause occasional spikes in tourism or changes in the price of pineapples and such, but they also cause random tropical storms and hurricanes. Lots of them. They're frequent enough, and devastating enough, to really ruin a perfectly enjoyable game. You can adjust the frequency of these random events, but due to the speed at which things

happen on your island, they're not something you can really take good advantage of—they're challenges to be survived more than opportunities for success.

As an expansion, *Paradise Island* isn't particularly exciting or astounding. It doesn't fundamentally alter the core game or add enough features to make those that didn't like *Tropico* take a second look. But it smartly adds "more of the same" in the right places and tweaks the right things. It's a decent

expansion for a pretty good game, worth grabbing if you're fond of governing Tropicans.



UPSIDE

Fixes some of *Tropico*'s annoyances, adds some decent new stuff to play with

DOWNSIDE

Doesn't actually extend or expand the game concept

RATING

★★★★★



(clockwise from above) You can set the rent and your cut of the sales; the higher you go, the higher the prices for customers. >>> Behold the game, in all of its glory. Yuck. >>> In one of the scenarios, there's been a jailbreak. Hire lots of security.

Mall Tycoon

As much fun as shopping on the day after Thanksgiving

by Steve Bauman

GENRE Mall Simulation **DEVELOPER** Holistic Design
[www.holistic-design.com] **PUBLISHER** Take 2
[www.take2games.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300,
64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

Though difficult to tell based on name alone, *Mall Tycoon* actually lets you design and build your own mall. No joke. You create the basic layout, place the stores and populate them with stuff to sell, hire mall cops and janitors to keep it safe and clean, and watch the customers, and money, roll on in.

At least that's the theory. How everything ties together is something of a mystery, as the manual offers zero insight into designing a proper mall and the game gives you little useful feedback. There's a science—well, a marketing pseudo-science at least—about where to place stores and food courts, and its entirely unclear if the game takes any of this into account.

Assuming you can fight through the awful interface, you can build a decently sized, three-story mall. A number of scenarios give you fixed goals, and there are open-ended situations that let you build the mall of your dreams (or nightmares). Unfortunately, designing the layout of the mall is itself a nightmare. While you place stores in large square blocks, it is an exercise in frustration to place a hallway to connect two wings of your mall. In theory, you place floors, then click "auto wall" to magically surround the area, but in practice it's something of a hit or miss option. It requires a lot of very non-intuitive clicking, and you have little way of knowing if you'll actually get your intended result.

There also seems to be little logic in the actual placement of stores. You put down a shell and populate it with something like items or storefronts—it's hard to tell, since the resultant store is nothing like anything in the real world. (Rather than have you determine each store's content, a



gives you a particularly good overview of how you're doing, or how to address any shortcomings. It's a lot of trial and error to get things going, and it's hard to work up any interest to figure out the game's interrelations.

Not helping matters is the unfortunate matter of *Mall Tycoon* possibly being the worst looking game in years. For some inexplicable reason, it's 3D as opposed to the usual sharp and colorful 2D found in games like *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and *Zoo Tycoon*. And it's really bad 3D. While you wouldn't expect particularly complex graphics when dealing with buildings, all the textures are blurry and indistinct (though their garishness is appropriate). The people running around are tiny little blurry sprites, with only a few frames of animation, and they appear to glide from store to store as the animation is out of synch with their movement speed.

It's easy to say graphics don't matter, but with most *Tycoon* types of games, you spend a lot of time sitting around waiting to see the results of your tweaking. *SimGolf* has a great twist, as you can play your course during the dead spots, but much of the pleasure derived from this sort of game is watching the little folks run around the game world doing interesting stuff. For example, watching people jumping for joy as they exit the rides in *RollerCoaster Tycoon* never really gets old.

There's also a lot of downtime in *Mall Tycoon*, and its terrible graphics deprive you of that visual payoff. The ugly, non-descript people in your malls never come to life. The visual possibilities for distorted mall stereotypes are endless: teenage hoodlums shoplifting and trying to scam on girls, the mallrats with enormous hair, families with screaming kids, the "too cool" for the mall people... in other words, the things that make a real mall such a thrilling vision of capitalistic hell.

But *Mall Tycoon* doesn't deliver on any the "thrills" of malldom. It's merely a clumsy strategy game lacking the one most

important part of all good *Tycoon* games, a personality. It's ugly, bland, boring and nondescript. Kind of like the average mall.

UPSIDE

A good concept, there may be a decent strategy game in there somewhere

DOWNSIDE

Somewhere beyond ugly, clunky interface, no personality, dull, boring

RATING

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



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PlayStation 2

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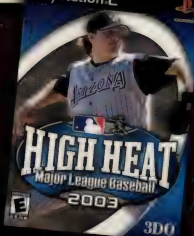
— Official PlayStation Magazine May 2001

"High Heat Hits Grand Slam with PS2 Debut."

— GamePro May 2001

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[clockwise from left] The engine doesn't push a lot of polygons, but the environments are large and the textures are colorful and detailed. >>> Taste the rainbow, buddy. >>> The environments are surreal and atmospheric, but the interface bars are somewhat distracting.



Darkened Skye

Tasting the marketing rainbow

by Benjamin E. Sones

GENRE Action/Adventure **DEVELOPER** Boston Animation [www.bostonanimation.com]
PUBLISHER Simon & Schuster Interactive [www.simonays.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II
 350, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

Darkened Skye is full of surprises. You wouldn't know it from looking at the box, but this is a game based on SKITTLES® brand candy. Publisher Simon & Schuster Interactive has pulled a classic bait and switch, saving the marketing tie-in as a post-purchase surprise. Can you blame them? It's not as though people would line up around the block to dole out \$40 for an elaborate advertising gimmick. Once you open the box and fire up the game, however, the truth is revealed. The land of Lynlora is in trouble—the dread Lord Necroth has stolen the rainbow, the source of all magic, and it's up to you to restore it. With the help of SKITTLES®, in this world, the colorful candies are the components that make magic work. When the rainbow was still around, they used to rain down from the sky. Like they do in the commercials. These days they are a bit more difficult to find, but your alter ego (Skye the dwentil herder) stumbles across an orange SKITTLES® in the opening cut scene, and the quest to restore the rainbow begins.

At this point you are probably asking yourself a few questions. Surely they can't be serious? Shouldn't we be outraged? And isn't SKITTLES® the singular of SKITTLES®? The answers are No, no, and apparently not, respectively. It turns out that *Darkened Skye* has one more surprise in store—it's actually a good game, marketing tie-in and all. Go figure.

To bring the rainbow back, you will have to find and assemble five prisms, each representing one of the five colors of the rainbow (yes, five—there is no blue in the SKITTLES® rainbow). These prisms are scattered across five different lands, each of which is based on one of the SKITTLES® "taste the rainbow" television commercials. You will rescue a pirate king in Ogmire, a mire of swamps and sunken ruins. You will free five magical birds in Zen'Jai, a vaguely Asian land ruled by an evil warlord. You will travel through time in a blasted desert called Stoneheath and battle vampires in a surreal Gothic gargoyle realm. Every once in a while you'll go back to Lynlora itself, the hub of all your adventures, to embark on a number of mini-quests and watch cut scenes.

It might be difficult to swallow the whole concept if the game took itself even a

little seriously, but fortunately it doesn't. Skye and her gargoyle sidekick Draak (who sounds a bit like Adam Carolla) constantly poke fun at the characters they encounter, adventure game conventions, and even SKITTLES® themselves. The writing is witty, the characters (even the bit parts) are wonderful, and the voice acting is spot on. You'll want to laugh at the game, and it's okay, because the game laughs with you.

The gameplay is a traditional platform action/adventure recipe that mixes exploration, puzzle solving, and combat in equal measures. The environments are wonderfully surreal, even if they rely a bit too heavily on mazes and jumping puzzles. Movement can be a bit sloppy. You have a high degree of midair maneuverability—too much for fine control, at times, and Skye sometimes bounces off objects unexpectedly or (more rarely) falls through the level geometry. The ornate frame that surrounds your view is unnecessary and distracting—it would be nice if you could turn it off.

The wonderful magic system makes up for many of the game's irksome idiosyncrasies. As you journey through the five lands you'll find various SKITTLES® that you can use to power spells of increasing efficacy. Each spell requires specific combination of SKITTLES® to function, so you have to juggle your candy resources to keep the appropriate spells active. Most of the spells are useful in combat, but many can be used in other ways as well. Polar Pulse is a great way to deal damage, for instance, but you can also use it to create a frozen bridge across rivers and lakes (word to the wise: Skye can't swim). The game rewards creative thinking—if it seems like a solution should work, it usually does.

There is a certain type of gamer that will enjoy *Darkened Skye*; if the thought of jumping puzzles and winding mazes makes you retch, that gamer isn't you. If you can contemplate the concept retch-free, then proceed with just a little bit of caution. The game will frustrate and delight you in turns, but the whimsical writing provides ample reward. And a hell of a sugar craving.

UPSIDE

Funny, wonderfully written and acted, great magic system

DOWNSIDE

Too many mazes and jumping puzzles, somewhat sloppy control

RATING

★★★★★



Schizm: Mysterious Journey

Bring your pencil, notebook, and perhaps Kurt Godel

by Cindy Yans

GENRE Adventure **DEVELOPER** Detalion [www.detalion.com] **PUBLISHER** DreamCatcher [www.dreamcatchergames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

If you remember that the creators of *Schizm: Mysterious Journey* also brought us *Reah: Face the Unknown*, you've probably already run away screaming. Wait! Come back. *Schizm* outperforms it in spades.

Australian science fiction award winner Terry Dowling helped develop the story, and while it is a trifle weak for an adventure game, it does offer a modicum of intrigue. In the year 2083, a space mission to the planet Argilus is aborted when communications break down. You play Hannah Grant as well as her partner Sam Mainey who transport to the planet's surface to find out what went wrong with the deserted yet strangely undisturbed world.

The game was designed for DVD; this review is based on the CD version. If you get the five-disk CD version, by all means choose the full install if you have the spare gigabytes. Even in this version, the game looks splendid—one of the most beautiful adventure worlds yet, rivaling the many worlds of *Myst* and *Atlantis*. Yes, the world is muddy and quite pixilated in spots, but it doesn't matter. It's still enchanting.

You experience a somewhat organic sensation as you travel through the world, often as though you're traveling through a living entity. And travel you must—back and forth and up and down, and back and forth and up and down, and across and up and back and down, and over and down and across and up. If the sound and music were not so wonderful (creepy, haunting, ethereal, suspenseful), and so well integrated, the navigation would be even more painful. The pathing is node-based, and there is no way to skip the animations each time you revisit a path. There is also no "zap" function (like *Myst*'s) to jump ahead to places already visited.

Retracing your path happens a lot in this game, especially since you need to get both Sam and Hannah to the same point in their respective parallel dimensions, and 16 save slots are uncomfortably few with this much traveling back and forth to see if action A affected thingamajig B or not.

Having already referred twice to *Myst*, it's impossible not to make a direct comparison between *Myst III* and *Schizm*. Both have multiple world nodes, both have video sequences with live actors, both have lovely high-quality animation, and both have puzzles involving Strange and Mysterious devices.

While *Myst III*'s Brad Dourif's performance was a bit over the top, it had a solid dramatic quality that you won't find here. The actors either mug, muddle, or mumble, including the voice actors you don't see who play Sam and Hannah. Character realization is non-existent. The video quality is poor, and badly integrated into the beautiful backgrounds, and the "electrical between-dimension" effect that they're going for simply doesn't work.

Ignore it. Central to the game are its Strange and Mysterious puzzles. The game is reminiscent of both *Obsidian* and *Rama*, but more difficult than either one of them. You may, in fact, find that this is one of the most

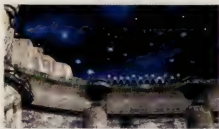
This traveling island transports you to new nodes on the world map. >>> These flying entities look like... hives? Is this significant?

difficult adventures you've ever encountered. *Myst III* is child's play compared to this baby. Complex calculations, measuring, geometric relational problems, Strange and Mysterious sound puzzles, Strange and Mysterious glyph translation. It's mind boggling, really, and unless you are an expert at these types of activities, and take a ream of notes, and copy every symbol from every carving, mural, painting, or Strange and Mysterious device, it's unlikely that you'll be able to finish this without a bit of help, especially when it's not evident when action A affects thingamajig B.

The payoffs make the effort worthwhile.

There is a tremendous satisfaction almost each and every time you complete a solution—a new world node opens, or a gorgeous cut scene transports you to an even more magical setting.

Myst clone lovers who need a really, really tough nut to crack will be in heaven with *Schizm*, poor peripheral elements be damned. But the average player will be frustrated, and the newbie had just better opt out right now. If you do take it on, though, be armed with lots of scrap paper and a large bottle of Excedrin.



Starry, starry night. Note the relative heights of the gold tipped towers.

UPSIDE

A gorgeous, mysterious environment with many hours of gameplay; a must for the *Myst* addict

DOWNSIDE

Poor navigation, bad video, high frustration level with extremely difficult puzzles sometimes inadequately clued.

RATING

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Lineage™

Lair of Valakas

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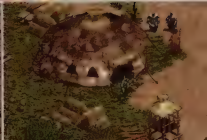
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GENRE Wargame **DEVELOPER** John Tiller
www.hpssims.com **PUBLISHER** HPS Simulations
www.hpssims.com **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 200, 32MB
 RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2+; PBEM, Internet, LAN **ESRB** Not Rated

Once the touchstone of an entire generation's angst, the Vietnam War has quietly slipped into the dim recesses of history when no one was watching. To most people today, it's as distant as WWII, and only marginally more remembered than Korea in its particulars. Did we really spend nearly a decade and 50,000 lives fighting Communism in that distant, tropic land?

We did, and the military legacy of that war is still with us, in everything from our dependence on helicopters to our lingering dread of "nation building" and irregular warfare. What haven't been with us in appreciable numbers are computer games on the subject, at least until John Tiller started his *Squad Battles* series with HPS Simulations. Now we have two Vietnam wargames from this team—*Tour of Duty* is the latest, joining *Vietnam* this March as the second in Tiller's exploration of small-unit actions in the 'Nam.

Like the original, this second title is a turn-based, hex-map game with five-minute turns and 40-meter hexes, where units are leaders, squads, and individual vehicles. It features quite a few tweaks and enhancements over *Vietnam*, some of which are part of the improvements necessary for the third *Squad Battles* game, which covers the Pacific theater in WWII. The scenarios in *Tour of Duty* run the gamut from large-scale search and destroy operations to intense set-piece battles, and involve extensive use of helicopters, armor, and even riverine forces. There are 44 regular scenarios, and a further 20 or so in the new campaign games, including battles with Australian, Korean, and South Vietnamese forces as well as the usual Americans. The Australians are particularly welcome, as their gear is somewhat different from the GI stuff and their Centurion tanks make for a change of pace from Pattons.

New for this game is a rudimentary campaign system, which Tiller says he'll expand upon in future games. Right now it's really just a way to give you additional scenarios not available any other way. You choose a persona—there are five, spanning the different phases of the war, and including one Australian—and then play through four or five battles in chronological order. If your persona, represented on map by a leader marker,

Squad Battles: Tour of Duty

Brown water, green jungle, red blood

by Robert Mayer

dies, the campaign is over. Otherwise, there is no linkage between battles and victory and defeat don't really matter except for your ego. You can, however, play the campaigns multiplayer, with a human playing the communists, which should add quite a bit of spice to the activity. As it stands, the campaigns are a nice selection of additional battles featuring common formations, but more interactivity would be a blessing.

Mechanically, *Tour of Duty* is easy to play, though the subtleties of combat are not easily mastered. Graphically it's a mixed bag. The maps are very good, and the unit portraits and weapon graphics are well done as well. The 2D unit icons are hard to distinguish, however, and the optional NATO symbols are clunky; better versions of both are available online as free third-party add-ons. Ironically, this is one place where the usual Tiller 3D map view, absent in the *Squad Battles* games, would actually come in handy, as it's often very difficult to get an instinctive feel for the terrain nuances that are so important in tactical combat. Overall, though, the game is a professional and attractive package.

The lack of a map editor, however, continues to bedevil all of Tiller's games. While you can use the included scenario editor to carve up any of the game's maps into smaller chunks, and there is an incredible variety of landscapes to play with, the inability to craft home-grown scenarios completely from scratch flies in the face of the accepted wisdom of tactical wargames. You get a lot of play value for your money still, but it's unfortunate to see HPS continue to convey of its fears about full-featured editors killing future sales. *Operation Flashpoint*, for example, has a marvelously complete editor, and yet there are no less than three commercial expansions out or planned.

Other than the lack of a map editor, the game really has few flaws. It's somewhat less engrossing than many tactical board wargames, partly because Tiller's design hides many of the calculations and details of combat that wargamers obsess over, and partly because with fog of war on you often have very little idea whether you're even hurting the guys you're shooting at. That's probably realistic, and certainly very evocative of

combat in Vietnam. That it actually makes for usually very entertaining and even exciting games is a tribute both to Tiller and the scenario designers who work with him.



[top] Heavy helicopter support is part and parcel of the American war effort in *Tour of Duty*. >>> Into Cambodia...yes, tanks were used extensively in Southeast Asia, often to great effect.

UPSIDE

Accessible, moderately detailed tactical simulation of Vietnam combat, lots of scenarios

DOWNSIDE

Game system lacks the visceral attraction of the best tactical boardgames, no map editor

RATING

★★★★☆

Squad Battles: Vietnam

Squad Leader meets the VC

RATING



GENRE War **DEVELOPER** John Tiller
[www.hpssims.com] **PUBLISHER** HPS Simulations
[www.hpssims.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium
200, 32 MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2+ Players;
Internet, LAN, PBEM, Modern, Serial
ESRB Not Rated

If any conflict has gotten short shrift in computer wargaming, it's been Vietnam. That's why it comes as something of a pleasant surprise that designer John Tiller decided to begin a new game series with *Squad Battles: Vietnam*. And new the series is! *Vietnam* just



The patched version adds NATO-style unit symbols (seen here in zoomed-out mode).

plain feels different, different from many other wargames and most especially from other Tiller games. There have been some complaints that many of Tiller's recent games feel like variations on a theme, but that won't be true here—*Vietnam* sports the most original Tiller design since *Age of Sail*.

As the series title suggests, the game focuses at the squad level, with 40-meter hexes, turns that are typically five minutes long, and units consisting of leaders, squads, heavy weapons teams, radio operators, and individual vehicles. If this all sounds like the computer equivalent of the boardgame *Squad Leader*, you're right: *Squad Battles: Vietnam* comes closer to replicating the turn-based gameplay of *Squad Leader* than any other computer wargame. The one significant difference is that squads' individual weapons are modeled, and you can choose to fire selected weapons types or all weapons as the situation requires. The look of



The ski jump event is simple, yet strangely entertaining. >>> Let's light this candle!

the game is different as well, with large hexes and unit markers, detailed map graphics, and no pseudo-3D mode. The first patch to the game adds NATO-style unit symbols; not as pretty, but useful for differentiating unit types.

The game ships with nearly 30 scenarios from all points of the war. These scenarios range in size from quite small and short to fairly large, although none of them are as monstrous as those in other Tiller works; as such, *Vietnam* is great for PBEM or multiplayer gaming.

As you might expect of the first game of a new series, there are a (very) few rough edges, and some features that could use pumping up. You need the patch for its bug and play balance fixes, and even with the patch there is no support for combined assaults on an enemy hex, or for setting up reliable ambushes. Also, scenarios are stand-alone—there is no campaign as such. Many complaints, though, have been fixed, and others were fixed in a patch with the release of *Squad Battles: Tour of Duty*. [see page 84]

Taken all together, though, *Squad Battles: Vietnam* is a great wargame: refreshing in the newness of its design and gritty in its depiction of tactical warfare in Vietnam. —Scott Uddell

Salt Lake 2002

At least there are no figure skating judges

RATING



GENRE Winter Sports **DEVELOPER** Attention to Detail [www.atd.co.uk] **PUBLISHER** Eidos
[www.eidos.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 450,
128MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4 players; same
machine **ESRB** Everyone

Salt Lake 2002 is the winter edition pseudo-sequel to Eidos' mega-flop *Sydney 2000*. While no one is going to sling a gold medal



around its box, it's much better than its predecessor in almost every way, which boosts the quality from abysmal to merely okay.

You get six winter events including the downhill, bobsled, slalom, skiing aerials, snowboard slalom, and ski jump. The events themselves are more conducive to a video game than those in *Sydney*; weightlifting does not a fun game make. It's much more fun to zip down a mountain doing 70 MPH in the downhill, or to race head to head against another competitor in the snowboard slalom.

The problem is that there is still very little "game" outside of the events. In "Olympic" mode, for example, all you do is compete in the events, vie for a medal—and that's it. There's no running medal count, no concern with how you are doing compared to the other competitors...it just ends. What made the old Epyx games so much fun was that they kept a tally of your standings throughout the games, a feature that is sorely lacking here.

Another oddity is the lack of countries from which to choose. 16 countries make up the roster and there are a lot of no-shows. After watching the Opening Ceremonies of the real Winter Games, 16 seems a shade light. Adding to the generic feel, there are no national anthems during medal presentations.

Multiplayer options are limited to hot seat and simultaneous play. This wouldn't be so bad except the game only supports up to four players, and each player must use a separate control device. So you need to daisy chain several game pads just to compete against your friends.

Salt Lake 2002 is a 10-minute time killer, and while it's undeniably better than *Sydney 2000*, it's a shame Attention to Detail didn't do more with the design to make it engaging rather than just a quick fix after watching the Winter Olympics on television. —William Abner



Apparently the game is also called Demonworld II >>> A no holds barred briefing screen

Demonworld: Dark Armies

A truly hellish game

RATING



GENRE Strategy **DEVELOPER** Ikarion
[www.ikarion.com] **PUBLISHER** Xicat
[www.xicat.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 233,
32 MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-3 players; Internet,
LAN **ESRB** Teen

Demonworld: Dark Armies is based on a German miniatures wargame. The game pits Dwarves, the Empire (mankind), and evil Orks (alternatively called Orks, the game can't quite decide) in what appear to be a series of endless battles. There's a single player campaign (as the Empire), a series of scenarios, and multiplayer action with up to two other people.

The game doesn't come with a manual, not even on the CD, but you can download one from the company website. It's 22 pages, poorly translated, missing important information, and only modestly helpful. There's a tutorial but it doesn't do much beyond discuss basic tactics, leaving the "how to do things" part to your imagination. Through trial and error you'll have to figure it out, but by then you'll realize that the enemy AI is almost nonexistent, and your own troops seem to enjoy traveling from point A to point

B by visiting the rest of the alphabet first.

The cutscenes are actually quite charming, but the in-game graphics are ugly, featureless, and non-distinctive. If you're a time traveler from 1992 you might call them gorgeous and thrilling, especially if you were also drunk.

Somewhere in this mess there's an interesting game. It actually has a lot going for it. It's the sort of real-time strategy game that eschews resources and instead has you manage troops only. There's a wide variety of troops, includ-

ing siege engines, cavalry, infantry, and the scenarios offer a wide range of missions: everything from sabotage, to recon, to all out sieges. You can pause to give orders and you must use formations to deal with certain enemy troop types. Artillery is incendiary, and fires can spread through wooden structures or forests, while your units gain experience as the campaign progresses. There is a nice mix of unit types including heroes and the game even gives you spells to cast, but the AI is so poor and the presentation so lazy you'd be much better off buying the boardgame from an import store. —Andrew S. Bub



Dominions: Priests, Prophets, and Pretenders

Wargaming with the Undead

RATING



GENRE Fantasy Strategy **DEVELOPER** Illwinter
[www.illwinter.com] **PUBLISHER** Illwinter
[www.illwinter.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 90,
16MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-14 players; Internet,
PBEM, Hotseat **ESRB** Everyone

Dominions is hands down one of the most complex fantasy-themed computer game of all time. Developer Illwinter eschews the notion that fantasy need be a beer and pretzels affair; rather the design is similar to a hard-core operational level war game, only with

magical war beasts in place of Russian T-34s.

You play the role of a pretending God, slugging it out with up to 13 other pretenders, all of whom are trying to become the one true deity. You customize your God to your liking, choosing your strengths and weaknesses, and there are so many choices to make right off the bat that you could easily play dozens of games and not even come close to playing the same archetype. You recruit armies, convert non-believers, besiege castles, issue battle orders, stave off invasions, and so on.

The game has a huge learning curve. This complexity comes in the form of massive information overload, coupled with an obtuse user-interface. There are over 400 spells in the game, separated into several schools of magic, and they play such a crucial role that studying the spell list is vital to success. Add to this a vast number of units, (over 600) each sporting 12 attributes that vary from hit points to fatigue and you have a lot of stuff to worry about.

Odd terminology also makes getting into the game difficult. The Undead are called



left) Combat graphics are anything but eye-popping, but at least you can feel the ebb and flow of a battle. >>> top) Here's a look at the main game interface. The graphics quality is circa 1990. >>> There are over 600 units in the game, including individual commanders with special abilities.

"Ernor" and Lizardmen are dubbed "Ctiss". Many of the individual unit-types have unique names and it takes a long time just to figure out who everyone is, let alone what they do.

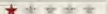
Once you get past the initial hailstorm of information, however, there's a deep, satisfying game underneath. It takes a few weeks to get the hang of what you are doing and why certain things are happening, but the effort is worth it in the end. —William Abner
Dominions is available online at www.illwinter.com



Frank Herbert's Dune

Boredom is the game killer

RATING



GENRE Action **DEVELOPER** Cryo
[www.cryo-interactive.de] **PUBLISHER**
Dreamcatcher Interactive [www.dream-
catchergames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II
400, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

Dreamcatcher is best known for shipping adventure games to bored American adventure game fans. These adventure games are typically based on literary properties like *Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and often they're just good enough to be worth a look. This game is not.

In the grand tradition of *Anne McCaffrey's* last two disasters, *Frank Herbert's Dune* is a great literary property stuck in an awful game. More like a third-person action game packed with boring adventuring staples such as pointless conversation trees and item collecting. Come to think of it, action game fans will be disappointed too. So will fans of *Dune*. Even Frank Herbert would be disappointed. Odds are good that if the inestimable Mr. Herbert were still alive today he'd be more than just disappointed—he might just die again out of shame.

The game begins with a synopsis of the first 100 or so pages from the book (this takes about 2 minutes), which outlines the basic power struggle. The controls are slow and clumsy and most of the game involves sneaking up on and knifing bad guys, shooting them, and finding things to use on other things. All told, it's surprising how easy the puzzles are and how non-



The best scene in the game (not as interactive as it looks). >>> Sneaking and tumbling are part of the fun.

interactive the rest of the game is. On the bright side, if you like killing time chatting with poorly lip-synched characters, this is the game for you.

The gameplay is bad, the "adventuring" is boring, the magnificent *Dune* story is condensed into something dull and lifeless, but it looks pretty enough, if only when showing the massive and frightening giant worms. Finally, why is it called *Frank Herbert's Dune* when the developer obviously cared so little for the classic story? Ah well, like the *Spice Melange* itself, this game is just gussied up worm excrement. —Andrew S. Bub

Combat

Move, shoot, repeat

RATING



GENRE Retro-action **DEVELOPER** Magic Lantern
Playware [www.mlantern.com] **PUBLISHER**
Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] **REQUIREMENTS**
Pentium II 350, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8
players, Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

A remake of the old Atari 2600 game *Combat* is either a sublimely brilliant idea or a sick joke. The original, with little square-ish tanks shooting each other, is as primitive as *Pong*. It's probably gaming's second major deathmatch game (after *Space Wars*), however, so it's sort

of retro-modern. Since an oddly appealing remake of *Pong* already exists, maybe *Combat* is worthy of the same sort of treatment.

While it might be worthy, it isn't particularly good. It is a 3D tank shoot 'em up, kind of like a *BattleTanx* or *Assault Rigs* from console days gone by, where the basic goal is to exit the level without dying. They vary from featuring straight-up combat against various opposing tanks and gun emplacements to being more puzzle-like, even treading into platform game territory. Do this a bunch of times and you win... in true iron man fashion, there is no saved game or way to start further in to the game's 30 levels. It also has multiplayer (obviously) and a level editor for those inclined to roll their own.

Outside of the lack of saves or level skipping, everything is structurally sound (if simple). The game's biggest problem is the control, or lack thereof. You can play with either the keyboard or a gamepad, and neither is particularly satisfying. The gamepad lacks precision, and the keyboard lacks responsiveness. It's hard not to wish for a standard first-person shooter control



You do a lot of strafing in the game, which would be a lot easier with a better control scheme. >>> Catching some air on one of the "platform-esque" levels.

scheme (i.e. mouse/keyboard), as the basic tank controls (forward/back/left/right/strafe left and right) are identical.

If you're so inclined to rush around monotonous levels shooting stuff, this is definitely up your alley. It's simple and initially somewhat fun, but after a while it grows pretty monotonous. There are probably ways to make an interesting version of *Combat*. This isn't it. —Steve Bauman

of the

BOX

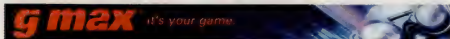
Game modding isn't all that it could be. Although the hobby has evolved into a veritable cottage industry over the past few years, it still has a long way to go before entering the gaming industry mainstream. The biggest hurdle to overcome is the absence of a common set of standards. Every game developer

for nearly every game that you want to modify.

Of course, that fond farewell will only become a reality if game companies get on board the *gmax* bandwagon, as *gmax*-created content can't be used in a game without a supporting game pack. Discreet is

doing a good job of making that a reality, so far. Along with those 100,000 downloads to home users, the company lists a number of top game developers as supporters. Auran and Strategy First included a game pack with the recently released model train sim *Trainz*, Microids did the same with *Tennis Masters Series*, Microsoft posted a game pack for *Flight Simulator 2002* shortly after that title hit stores, and is further planning on offering

support in the hotly anticipated *Dungeon Siege*. Most importantly, considering the prominence of first-person shooters in the mod community, is Westwood Studios' support of the program in *Command & Conquer: Renegade*. This not only gives *gmax* a toe-hold in the most competitive modding environment, it gets the program out to the wide audience that turns almost any game with the *Command & Conquer* label into a best seller. Discreet also provides support for *Quake III Arena*, via the "tempesti"



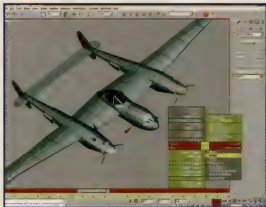
taking it to the max

Discreet's *gmax* adds more to modding

approaches things differently, meaning that wannabe modders often have to spend more time learning the programming ins and outs than actually designing modifications. That keeps a lot of people working with nothing but familiar *Quake* and *Unreal* engine games, and a lot more on the sidelines.

That might be about to change. Discreet, a Montreal-based company best known for visual effects and animation software like *3ds max*, is trying to change the way that we mod. Its answer to the standards question is *gmax*, a free program that gives users complete control over 3D gaming environments. Based on *3ds max* technology, *gmax* allows you to create new levels, objects, player models, skins, weapons, and pretty much everything else that's a part of your favorite games. It supports mods of any type or scale, from minor multiplayer level edits to total conversions. Over 100,000 downloads have been registered at the Discreet website in the first four months of the program's existence, with that total going up every day.

Numbers are rising with good reason, too, since *gmax* isn't just another level designer. Discreet is positioning the program as the level designer, thanks to a series of agreements with major game developers and publishers. The plan is for developers to get the ball rolling by producing game content with *gmax dev*, a powerful program that could be described as *gmax*'s big brother, as it comes with a software developer's kit. This content is then linked to *gmax* with the creation of game packs that include tools and models for use with specific titles. The end result is a customized editor that relies on the familiar *gmax* standards while simultaneously using exclusive material provided by the supporting game company. It's really the best of both worlds. You get to play with a developer's official toys, but in *gmax*'s sandbox, by its rules. Say goodbye to relying on companies to release proprietary editing tools, as well as to the confusion caused by having to master a different editor



Discreet's *gmax* editor in action.

game pack that can be downloaded from their site.

For further information, check out the Discreet website. There, you can read about the technical details of the *gmax* project, get the inside skinny on supporting game publishers, and even fill out a petition to urge the developer of your favorite game to get involved. The site of course also hosts the 21.4 MB installer as well as help files, tutorials, and sample textures to help get you started. All told, the files clock in at a dial-up daunting 50 MB, but don't let that dissuade you from making the download. If you're at all interested in modding, either as a designer or as someone who plays and appreciates the work of others, this is a great investment of your time. If Discreet can make *gmax* the mod community's gold standard, all gamers are likely to reap huge benefits in the future. ●

Mods & Ends

Achtung, Baby

Return to *Castle Wolfenstein* continues to develop a strong online community. Co-development teams at Gray Matter and Nerve Software are doing their part to encourage this with the release of a level editing toolkit. The 13.5 MB download, which can be found both at Planet Wolfenstein and its parent FilePlanet, features all of the programming goodies required to edit the existing levels and create new ones. As a result, user-designed maps are showing up on the game's many fan sites nearly every day. Some of the best that I've come across include Baddie's Tank (6.5 MB), a great map for those of us who like to skulk in the shadows, and Fiesling's Eye of Horus (3.9 MB), good for anyone who enjoys the Indiana Jones take on National Socialism. Surf to Blasters Map Central or Allied for these maps, plus news on the latest and greatest in homebrewed *Castle Wolfenstein* level design.

On the Beach

Things aren't proceeding quite so well with *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. Although the game has been riding high on the sales charts since its January release, lackluster multiplayer options have caused it to lag behind its WW II rival in terms of online support. That's not to say that a sizable web community hasn't grown up around the game, however. A lot of interesting mods have been making the rounds. Start off by adding the red stuff that EA omitted, courtesy of any one of a pile of good blood mods. Elite1's is probably the best, as his Blood Pack 4.0 includes spill and splatter effects. Other mods include dozens of skins for both the Allies and Axis (hello, Waffen SS) and a number of files that tweak weapon performance and realism. There isn't much in the way of new maps yet, although enterprising designers have been busy editing the out-of-the-box levels. Cieskins & Scott have reworked the Omaha beach level with a 4.3

MB mod that adds co-operative play. All of these mods can be found at top *Medal of Honor* sites like Planet Medal of Honor, Allied Assault, and Medal of Honor Center.

Sam I Am!

Oskar "Zoot" Lindgren has added bot combat to *Serious Sam: The Second Encounter*. Serious Boot, originally released just before Xmas for Sam's first encounter, now features serious support for the sequel and a number of, um, serious improvements to the AI code. The biggest change is that bots now take advantage of new weapons like the sniper rifle, chainsaw, and flamethrower. Grab the 1.37 MB file from the Serious Boot website.

Take That, Diablo!

"This monster is just like the last one, except mauve! In the name of all that is holy on this Earth, keep clicking!" That's just one of the many messages that you'll see in *Statbuilder*, an hilarious send-up of roleplaying games from the aptly named Stupid Idiot Studios. The game itself consists of nothing but a tiny menu screen (powered by the "Mind-Raper" graphical engine) with a button that you click repeatedly to advance 30 character statistics that include such attributes as SAT Scores, Bleeding, and Pusillanimity. What's most pathetic is that it's hard to stop clicking, even long after you've stopped laughing. So I guess Blizzard can safely begin work on *Diablo III* after all. Frodo wannabes with a sense of self-deprecation can download the 650K program from the official *Statbuilder* website. And be sure to check out the website, especially the cinematic introduction and the gallery of concept sketches. ●

LINKAGE

ALLIED

www.planetwolfenstein.com/allied

ALLIED ASSAULT

www.alliedassault.com

BLASTERS MAP CENTRAL

mapcentral.euro-wolfenstein.com

DAY OF DEFEAT

www.dayofdefeatmod.com/

DISCREET

www.discreet.com

FILEPLANET

www.fileplanet.com

MEDAL OF HONOR CENTER

www.mohcenter.com

PLANET MEDAL OF HONOR

www.planetmedalofhonor.com

PLANET WOLFENSTEIN

www.planetwolfenstein.com

SERIOUS BOOT

www.3dactionplanet.com/seriousam/seriousboot

STATBUILDER

statbuilder.stupididiostudios.com

BARGAIN BIN

Europa Universalis

With *Europa Universalis II* in stores, the price point on the original game—which has to be the most realistic, detailed strategy game released for the PC in ages—is plummeted to under \$10. Less than the price of a textbook and twice the fun. (Strategy First/2001)

Icewind Dale

Got primed for the imminent release of *Icewind Dale II* by picking up the original game in the series, now priced under \$15. And don't believe the *Diablo* comparisons—there's more to this game than hacking and slashing. (Interplay/2000)

MIG Alley

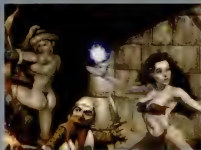
It's since been surpassed by the likes of *IL-2 Sturmovik*, but *Empire's MIG Alley* remains one of the all-time combat flight sim classics. Now available for around seven bucks, it should be in the game collection of every virtual flier. (Empire Interactive/1999)

Oni

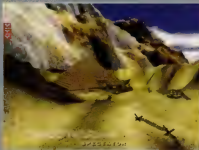
Although a few serious flaws left *Oni* on the short side of desirable at its full sticker price, a recent drop to the 10-dollar range has made the fighting game plenty attractive to bargain hunters. (GoGames/2001)

Typing of the Dead

The strangest idea of the past year, which can best be described as *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing* reimagined by George Romero, has hit the bargain bins. Kill zombies and improve your word-per-minute rate for just \$10. (Take 2 Interactive/2001)



The Statbuilder logo hits awfully close to home. >>> All we need is the Ark of the Covenant and this RTCW setting would be complete.



I was twenty-five and an accident waiting to happen. It arrived punctually one night in early October of 1994. "Virgin's out of time," Erik said, and I sort of perked up, but not really. I'd spent all day on the set of Oliver Stone's *Nixon* portraying Sleeping War Protester Outside The Frame #48, to which I was now belatedly devoting considerable craft. "Kevin's got Adam West (TV's original Batman) but they need it by next week."

Erik had always been my favorite of my three roommates, not just because I'd known him since childhood but because he was hardly ever around. He was also an assistant producer at Virgin Interactive, which had already fired me once as a writer on the *Golden Nugget* project a couple months

on me to get me fired up about writing *Golden Nugget* was even more flattering than being called unfilmable. In the week before I was scheduled to turn in a complete first draft, Potter, flushed with his success at having acquired Adam West to rev things up despite the ensuing budget strains, took Erik and me to the real *Golden Nugget* in Las Vegas. There, by way of inspiration, they showed me the world's largest shapeless chunk of gold rock encased in glass at any casino in the world. They showed me the Presidential Suite and the 24-Karat Club. They showed me a brochure photograph of the Olympic-sized pool. They treated me like visiting royalty from a small backward nation we need something from.

Upon getting back to L.A., the three of us got loaded and watched 1966's *Batman* starring (of course) Adam West—the movie where he uses the bat-shark repellent. This was on Saturday night. On Monday, I was to turn in the first third of my script for Virgin's immediate perusal. Then on Tuesday, I would turn in the next twenty pages. On Wednesday, I would hand in the finished product, from which they would begin setting up pre-production hiring and casting auditions in L.A. and Vegas.

Self-loathing in Las Vegas

My non-excuse for writing the most reviled game in the U.S.

by Kelly Wand

earlier, when the assignment had been simply to come up with a few variations on "Hit me!" and "I call" for the players to say. ("Too rich for my blood," was one of my offerings, beside which some marketing cog had penciled "wacky!")

"Kevin's got Adam West," I repeated dully. I'd never met Kevin Potter but his alleged habit of dispersing teenybopper-clog around arcade games with a single covert spray of mace seemed to be a sign of good producing. I hazily recalled his designs on "getting" Adam West for the gambling but I couldn't put together what any of this still had to do with me.

"But they can only afford him for three days," Erik went on. "Of the shoot."

"The shoot?" I'd never seen Erik so incoherent.

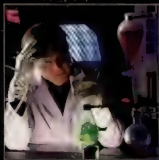
"Yeah, don't remind me. Anyway, I'm pretty sure I can get you twenty-five, maybe thr..."

"I'll do it," I said.

Prep Time

I'd been out of college a year and a half. My qualifications for writing a sixty-minute "interactive mystery" with alternate endings were a single short story in *Amazing Stories* magazine, a handful of aborted book-length novel attempts, and three film scripts. One of the scripts, the pirate one, was getting favorable reads but being dismissed as too expensive. I felt cocky about this. My stuff was "too expensive" to film—obviously a sign of genius.

The pomp and circumstance Erik and Potter lavished



Nugget yes. Golden no

This was the Platinum Era of full-motion video. *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* had gotten as close as any game had, except maybe *Myst*, to making full motion video sequences seem rewarding, with debacles like *Hell* (that thing with Dennis Hopper as Max Headroom on the box) as the occasional red flag snapping in the breeze. But muddy imagery was still equated with glamour. The medium itself did not intimidate me, nor did writing for '60s TV icons. Nor at the time did it seem worth re-evaluating that every single shot was to be shown from the constantly panning point of view of a voiceless main character.

The real problem was, this was a *gambling game*. Nobody under 50 played these things. Old ladies chugging silver dollars into one-armed bandits like they're feeding their cats weren't my usual target audience—at least not then.

Even more hellish was the "mystery" aspect. Mysteries are admirable jigsaws of fact accumulation, but certainly not my forte. And usually, they are just plain unrealistic. *The Maltese Falcon*'s a red herring; the Mafia never tries to whack Encyclopedia Brown—what a ridiculous genre. Hey, I had a billion and one excuses for sucking.

If Raymond Chandler couldn't explain his own plots, what was the big



deal? Virgin obviously wanted a *Scooby Doo* episode, preferably with West as Scrappy Doo. Dance, monkey boy, dance.

The Elements of Style

But it wasn't just Virgin weighing in on content. The Golden Nugget casino, I learned days before my due date, had turned down numerous story versions. It had a few stipulations of its own: there could be no scenes involving gunplay; no scenes involving violence or the threat of violence; no chases; no "nefarious" characters (their term); no dumbasses (my term); no plotlines in which the casino's reputation was besmirched in any way; no depiction of a Golden Nugget employee as anything but blandly helpful; no reference to any crime ever occurring on the Golden Nugget premises; no "unusual humor" (translation: anything remotely edgy/risque/humorous); no sexual innuendo (see above); and finally,

the word "gambling" was to be replaced, in all instances, with the word "gaming."

Potter also requested I somehow work in two lines of his own: "Sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you," and at some point Adam West had to exclaim, "To the elevators!"

"You have too many girls," noted Erik.

No one had ever said that to me before. "Huh?"

"For the gambling parts. The hand-sprites." "Oh."

I kept forgetting there was a game attached to this thing. This was easy to do. The only interactive aspect at all to "story" mode were the three poker tournaments the player had to win in order to earn more of these Faberge eggs I was laying.

"We have three sets of male hand-sprites and three sets of women's ones. So you need another dude."

"I could really use an idiot, Erik." "Just not too dumb."

"Why can't the players talk again?"

"Oh, yeah, also...when whatever her-name-is says, 'I'm Sheila

Warwick, call me whatever you like,' Kevin wants her to say, 'within reason' at the end. You know. Just in case. Also, 'curiouser and curiouser' isn't grammatical."

"It's from *Alice in Wonderland*..."

"Just fix it. Also Kevin wants to know what page the bear's line's on. He can't find it."

Eventually I hung up and stared again at the dead empty page. The fight never went out of me more abruptly on a project, before or since. All I wanted was closure. Of paper cutter blade against throat, preferably. It wasn't selling out if I wasn't making that much, was it? They wanted it two ways: bland and Wednesday.

There's No "I" in "Interactivity"

So here is the brilliant storyline. In *Golden Nugget* you play a mute named Steven Killsbourn in an Inspector Clouseau trench coat (the name being an un-phonetic anagram for one of only two clues in the game). His genius ex-girlfriend has invented a waffle-sized, cross-shaped computer chip that will either bring about a new golden age for mankind, or destroy it because of chaos theory and weather satellites, somethin', words, words, somethin'. A nefarious character tries to steal it and, with the help of Adam West's debonair crime fighter

Hugh Swain, and despite the unrelated distractions of three poker tournaments, you thwart them and lure Shelly away from her oily new suitor (she could never resist the way you always just stood around and said nothing) and hence make the world safe for chaos and chips alike. My spit-take surprise ending was that the culprit turns out to be...you! You stole the chip, see, to keep it safe from the real miscreants. Right.

Potter called me the next day to shepherd this sublime denouement. "The player's some kinda psychopath? He's been lying to everybody? You think that's funny?" I pointed out the player never says anything. Potter raged. Two days passed. I didn't hear from Erik at all.

Then I got another call. Adam West had insisted on seeing the script. He loved it.

West, the tall and charming fabric softener of the pox-infested opportunity that had been cinched tight around my head, arrived the first night with his short and charming wife. He was convincingly effusive about the script and his professionalism was refreshing. The first shot had him in goggles scrutinizing a scrap of paper in a fairly ornate "crime lab" while in voiceover he complained about being able to pack only so much into his duffel. Then there was an exterior, which meant cordons and crowd control and the chaotic jargon-laden stuff that makes film (and faux film) sets look deceptively fun and organized. By the time Adam West was in place in front of the Golden Nugget entrance, you could feel the suspense coming off the by now hundreds of milling people like an electric current. They waited... and waited... and finally got to see Adam West nosh a hamburger on-camera.

It's Lonelier at the Bottom

Golden Nugget didn't come out for another eighteen months. Abalone Software, which was handling the actual game, had issues of its own I'm told dwarfed anything on my end. I don't know much about it; it was hard to care once I got paid. They called Adam West back in to do some lethargic voiceovers resulting in some pretty severe lip-sync problems. In the credits, the name of Gary Columbus's character Ben Farland is listed as Ben Kingsley. The key to room 789 in the closing shot (the clue West never figures out) is so over-lit that it's unreadable. Coolest of all, the actors' seating arrangements in the poker tournaments and the corresponding hues of their hands, so greatly fussed over to match in-game hand sprites, don't go together at all. Neither do the in-game voices.

The reviews, of course, were withering. The writing, in an industry tolerant of bad writing, was singled out as especially odious. *Golden Nugget*, for all the well-deserved vitriol, didn't hurt a single career and I'm told it's made money.

The point of the story is, I think, that arrogance and incompetence must somehow play roles in the creative process of visual media based on the top-heaviness, but, in the end, if you write something stupid and put it on public display, people will laugh at you, so maybe you should just trust your instincts and go back to *Nixon*. But also, and more importantly, *Golden Nugget* was a seminally instructive experience in how the corporate universe works, and for that reason, is the greatest videogame ever made.

And deep down, we all know it. ●





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G.O.D.
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BCT: Brigade Combat Team
BCT Commander
Shrapnel
Now



The Proud and the Few
HPS Sims
Now



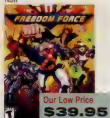
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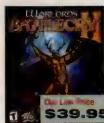
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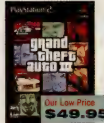
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It seems ed's fondness for running nasty letters has given some people the impression that no one likes us, which isn't quite true. Everyone loves us, and to show this, welcome to the love edition of Rebound. "Whoa, this month's issue is good," says the legendary Whashisface. Cool. "I subscribe to the three major computer gaming magazines," says Jim Gentry, "and I just wanted to let you know that I enjoy your magazine the most." Cooler. Aaron Prince thinks people need to get their acts together and stop complaining about "Panda Porn™," but he is concerned about one thing. "What the heck is a wookiee?" C'mon on, man, it's kind of Chewie.... Anyway, feel the love, kids, feel the love.

Best... ever

What can I say about the March issue of *CGM* except best... issue... ever! I loved the features on game mods and under-\$1,000 PCs. Kudos as well for your previous stories on game developers and breaking into the industry. It's great stuff not found in any other gaming pub.

Finally, I think it's great that you devote three full pages to letters from readers, which make for great reading, though can you maybe go a little lighter on the nonsensical diatribes from teens?

Rick Broido

Gordon worship

I loved the cover of your March issue. Finally someone gave Gordon Freeman what he deserves, a statue. I loved it too much I feel like going out there and carving that statue. No I'm not obsessed, but Gordon deserves this kind of recognition.

Dan Farnand

Descending mods

After reading and enjoying your dozen or so pages on mods, I remember making extra levels or an oldie but goodie called *Descent*. I don't recall ever seeing a total conversion, but I do remember when *Descent* was re-released with its older brother *Descent II*, it came with a level editor plus quite a few extra levels (or maps). Was there ever a modification of *Descent*?

Jonathan Hodges

We're not aware of any total conversions for *Descent*. Anyone know of any? —ed

Fired

I am a semi-hardcore computer gamer, and after reading the March 2002 issue, I went and downloaded some *Half-Life* mods. I would just like to point out that most of the mods were longer and more interesting than *Blue Shift*, a retail game. I was happy to see that the mod makers cared so much about the content of their mods, but my disappointment with the game developers increased.

I believe that when a situation like this comes up, all the developers of the game should be fired and replaced with the mod creators.

Adam Boginski

Harpooned

I just knew I liked your magazine, that it's geared toward the serious PC gamer, when I opened it this week and was reading about mods, particularly when you mentioned that the Naval Warfare Simulations Group was working on *Silent Hunter II* and *Fighting Steel* mods. I was already smiling big-time when I saw it, *Harpoon 3* for the Mac, with a Windows version in the works.

I was a Beta tester for the Windows version and I highly recommend this to any who love Naval Simulations. The amount of detail available is unmatched, and since your own site has *Harpoon 4* stretching to the end of the year, it is the only game in town for a while. There is a rather dedicated community on the net called Harpooners and they have many databases and scenarios available that will be compatible with this Windows version. If anyone on your staff remembers how the original game would slow on the large scenarios because of slow processors, imagine what it is like on a 1.4GHz Thunderbird with the stability of Windows XP. That alone should grab some interest, but if not take into account that multiplayer could very well be an option as well as nuclear weapons for some good old Cold War battles.

It would be nice if you would review this game in your magazine, what have you got to lose? This was a small group of people that helped make this possible especially the lone programmer, Jesse Spears. This gentleman is what gaming is all about!

Ethan Alsinger

Daily Defeat

Your article about the *Half-Life* mod *Day of Defeat* was quite interesting. I downloaded the mod the day I read your piece, and got to playing it soon thereafter. However, I found you forgot to mention one very pertinent aspect of that game: the cheating. It's a nice mod, but it's unplayable by people who aren't trying to cheat.

Anyway, keep up the good work, and try to make the captions funnier. That's always my favorite part of your magazine.

Alex Hughes

Researched

After reading the letter from David Nielsen, the "Market Research Manager" in your March issue ["We love market research," Page 92] I had to write. I've been an avid gamer

since 1993, and in recent years have come to the conclusion that market research and focus groups are the primary reason that even our best new games are really only mediocre when compared to older ones.

Back in the old days, games were developed by small groups of people who had limited tools but were passionate about their subject matter. Modern games have very little personality. They are developed by huge teams of people who get together and have meetings about the game's content. If one guy has an original idea, by the end of the meeting it's been diluted by the input of the others. And it gets worse when even more people get involved, such as corporate bean counters and marketers. By the time the game is ready to ship, it is suffering from a bad case of the LCD (Lowest Common Denominator) effect.

What they end up with is a game that their marketers and bean counters and focus groups have decided will be likely to appeal to the broadest imaginable audience. When money alone dictates the outcome, you can be sure to end up with a dry husk of a creation; a monster with a brain, but no soul.

Mark Lahren

Darkest download

I have been trying to access the site to download *The Darkest Day for Baldur's Gate II*, but where is it? I would like to get this add-on for my husband.

Rayla Larghe

They seem to have moved the site since we went to press.

You can start with the main TeamBG site at www.teambg.com, but at press time (again), the new site for *The Darkest Day* is lion.phpwebhosting.com/~teambg/tdd

Grouchy gamers

You certainly do get a lot of grouchy letters! Not enough reviews, too many reviews, the wrong kind of reviews, good market research, bad market research, etc. etc.

I've got a couple of opinions myself. I applaud your skeptical attitude re: market research, because market research can be terribly misleading, even though it is also can be useful.

The article on piracy was great. I, for one, am very interested in how the software market in other parts of the world is moving along. So, if that was "editorial fluff", keep it up.

Mark Buell

Brainy gamers

I just finished reading the rebound section of your March issue and can't believe some of the letters. I personally love strategy and role-playing games, and I love the fact that your magazine doesn't just focus on the lowest common denominator and recognizes that people with intelligence play computer games too. Sure, I appreciate reviews, but the articles are what set your magazine apart.

Andrew Chernecki

More Microsoft monoliths

I just finished reading my March issue, and as usual I finished with "Rebound" and its veritable cornucopia of humor. I wanted to respond to some of the letters, but so many threatened to quit buying CGM, I figured it wouldn't do any good. So, to you editors, reviewers, techies, etc., I say, "keep up the good work. Keep on keeping on."

Now excuse me while I return to my large, Afro-American priapic monolith. Thanks Bill.

Aaron Olmsted

Why those letters

I think your magazine is excellent. There are enough reviews and interesting features, etc. etc. My only issue is with the rebound section. What is the point of publishing letters by gamers with a sense of entitlement and silly gripes? I can see that on any forum around.

Derek Conrod

Because they write more letters. If more people wrote interesting, intelligent letters, we'd run them. -ed

Love to hate

I got a good question for you guys. Why the hell do people hate you so much, and why do people write you to tell you they hate you?

Dale Chan

People love to hate. -ed

Best Games? What about...

...Return To Castle Wolfenstein, and Battle Realms?

Dwight Eckhardt

... FIFA 2002, Serious Sam, Tropico, Return to Castle Wolfenstein, and Black & White!

Robin Ting

...Max Payne

Tom Barrett

Reader awards

In the spirit of your "Best of 2001" awards issue, I decided to give a few rewards of my own to various sections of the March 2002 issue.

The "Right On!" Award: This goes to Steve Bauman, who on page 14 addresses the excessive negativity gamers and gaming journalists have had lately and how it can negatively affect one's perception of the industry. 2001 wasn't my favorite year for games, but luckily I was able to pick up a bunch of the best games of 2000 this past year that ended up in the bargain bin because everybody was too busy writing scathing reviews of *Black & White* to be bothered to purchase them. *Giants*, *Blade of Darkness*, and *Sacrifice* were all terrific, and I bought each of them for a song. Actually, *Blade of Darkness* cost me a little more than a song, but it was still far too inexpensive for a game of its caliber. Oh, and as for 2001 games? Well, some of those rocked as well. I'll forgive you this time for ignoring *Anachronox* in your awards issue. Just don't let it happen again.

The "Whatever Helps You Sleep At Night" Award: To Mr. Turner, a reader who sent a letter ["Pirates R Us," Page 92] attempting to justify his downloading of hacked games. I don't care how nice you make piracy look in your letter, you suck if you're pirating games. And even if it leads to you buying games you wouldn't have otherwise tried, piracy is still wrong and you still suck.

The "He Doesn't Have A Clue" Award: To Mr. Burdick ["Um, yeah," Page 93], for his statement that *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* should have been made better for kids. It's interesting because it gives us a look into the minds of about 95% of the U.S. population, who carry with them the 1970's-era idea that video games are strictly for children. Come on, man, this is 2002! This is why we have a ratings system. And I have no interest in playing "Diablo II: Fuzzy Wuzzy's Scary Journey, rated E for Everyone."

John Shipley

Best of 2002

Alright, I just finished reading your new issue, and it was the funniest yet, but I have two huge problems with it. First, in your "Games (you think) You Want to Play in 2002," article, you listed about 5 games, none of which included *Impossible Creatures*. Sure, you say you don't want to be incorrect on the date or anything, but come on! After that pathetic one page preview in your June issue, one more screw up and me and a few Relic strong arms are gonna come down there and play the accordion with your spinal cord, capisce?

Second, you actually let those idiots have letters in your magazine? Shame, shame, *Diablo II* not for kids? No, I really thought for a moment that it was "Slaughter to Learn: Preschool Level." Wait, I forgot, it was meant for 17 and above. I'm surprised they didn't sign their name "Name Withheld to Protect The Children."

I've got a few other responses:
Punker Punker: Quit whining.
John Wawzak: Rock on.

Muth Jr: Get a life
crowyyzz: You are my new role model.

John Prezioso: Don't bring *Black & White* up. Ever. It was a bad game, get over it.

In your face, all you whiners. Ph34r the rant. Ph34r!

Bob Smith

Mork or TS Eliot?

Na-Noo Na-Noo,

Am I showing my age or what? Shazbot!

I have been an electronic gamer in one form or another since that show was popular in its first run.

I started with "Pong."

I moved on to Atari.

I then got a Nintendo Entertainment System.

I later purchased a Sega Genesis.

I finally decided to order a computer from Gateway.

I bought my first computer games at Sam's Club. *Doom II* and *Myst*. What the Hell was I thinking?

I am "hooked" nonetheless... first...

I subscribe to every PC gaming magazine available.

I buy nearly every game that has hit the top of the heap and a few that most certainly didn't. Damn you, *Trespasser*.

I have more money for games but...

I have no more time.

I can't even play all of the games I own to completion...

I am drowning...

I never had that problem when I had consoles. The games were few and expensive to boot.

I enjoy drowning.

I do not have console envy.

But... enough about me... how have you been???

Quinbus

Get a date

Near the end of the March "Inside the Sausage Factory" ["Zoo Construction High School"], Phil Steinmeyer envisions "Sim High School" as an "original game concept." In a way, this game has already been done, in the form of the "dating sim": a staple of Japanese gaming.

The most famous example (and as far as I know, the originator) is *Tokimeki Memorial*, first released by Konami in October 1995 for the PlayStation. In this game, the player plays as a high school guy who meets a number of girls. The object is to ultimately get a girl to fall in love with you. This is mainly accomplished by "developing" yourself; play

lots of sports and you'll impress Nozomi, the tomboy.

Or, study humanities and you'll meet Mio, the shy bookworm. The whole idea is to evoke a sense of romance and nostalgia for the high school years (although later derivative games did in fact take the concept in more "adult" directions).

There are many webpages about Tokimeki Memorial, easily found with any search engine if you care. Here's one: surf.to/tokimemo

"Dating sim" elements can also be found in the US-released PlayStation games *Thousand Arms* and *Azure Dreams*.

John Evans

Oni=Monster

In Tom Chick's March "Three Finger Salute" ["The 2001 Chicklettes"], he listed a few game titles that were "fake" and meant "absolutely nothing." However, (I don't know about the others) "oni" in Japanese means "monster."

Grace Wang

Your wookie is in the mail. -ed

One negative letter... maybe

I have never written in to a magazine before, but I felt that I just could not let this one go. I regret to inform you (no I don't) that I shall no longer be subscribing to your so-called magazine, or whatever it is, due to the severe lack of poor judgment on your part.

What's the reason to be so upset, you ask? Well at first I thought it was maybe just a coincidence, but now I have gotten like five of your magazines and I have come to the conclusion that you are the most biased magazine I have ever had the displeasure to subscribe to. Out of all my issues, not once have I seen you do a GameCube, X-Box or PS2 review. It seems like it's almost all about computer games.

And this freaky Japanese kid I know thinks you are all nerds. Just for the record, his mom is really weird.

StevenCheezle327

See, it is true, people do hate us because we don't cover enough console games. Or was it too many console games a few months ago? People, could you at least consult each other and get your beefs straight? Sheesh. -ed

ADVERTISERS INDEX

ADVERTISER	WEBSITE	PAGE NUMBER
300	WWW.300.COM	78-79
CHIPS & BITS	WWW.CHIPS&BITS.COM	63, 92-93, 97
CODEMASTERS	WWW.CODEMASTERS.COM	46-47
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GODGAMES	WWW.GODGAMES.COM	15
INFOGRAMES	WWW.INFOGRAMES.COM	4-5, 37
INTERPLAY	WWW.INTERPLAY.COM	12-13
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SCI-FI BOOK CLUB	WWW.SFBC.COM	95
UBISOFT	WWW.UBISOFT.COM	9, 29
XICAT	WWW.XICAT.COM	INSIDE BACK COVER



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Sierra
Now



Jack Attack II
Serra Games
Now



Exile
Ubi Soft
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Fox
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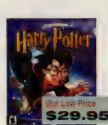
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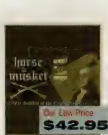
Black Moon Chronicles
DreamCatcher
Release Date: 03/02



Shadow of Zorro
DreamCatcher
Now



Conflict Zone
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babes in boyland

The state of Girlz and Gamz these Days

About five years ago, I wrote my first and only editorial dealing with women as gamers, and girls as up-and-coming gamers and lipstick wearers. I promised myself that I would avoid this topic, which, given my current gender, has always seemed a bit too masturb...er, self-serving. Nonetheless, things have changed somewhat in the last five years. And while it would be hyperbolizing to say that the state of the "girl-gamer" has earth-shatteringly evolved during that time, it has evolved somewhat.

The analysts who have been trying to evaluate and target the elusive teen-girl market for years still have their work cut out for them, and right now, that market is more crucial than ever. Demographers have charted a baby bulge between 1979 and 1994 when the baby-boomers finally folded up their wings, nested, and began to procreate. The resulting generation of over 60 million entities between the ages of 5 and 20 is approaching the boomers' 72 million mark. These children and young people, "Generation Y," "Echo Boomers," "Gen Millennium," whatever you want to call them, are the biggest marketing opportunity in almost half a century. Will they still want *Barbie Fashion Designer*?

Five years ago, while there were plenty of women playing Spades,

games industry you ask? money, chicks & power [sic]." Yeah, baby.

While there are and have been women designers of note from several places (Frog City, as one current example), so many of them seem to have come and gone, mostly through Sierra—Roberta Williams, Jane Jensen, Marcia Bales, Lori Cole, and I know I'm forgetting some folks—all of them "pursuing other opportunities."

But maybe we're still in luck. Playescape Research is doing a game called *Morgana*. Here's what it tells us, "*Morgana* is a new game concept for women. It is driven by the desire to learn about yourself, and not...by violence or competition. You play to explore, relate and learn. When you decide to end your journey, the storyteller offers you a divination...[tha]t will tell you about your strengths and weaknesses, about your temperament and present mood, as well as offer a suggested solution to your personal question." Well, thank you Mistress Cleo. Well done, Medium Rare.

Of course there is the old staple, Her Interactive, the home of the *Nancy Drew Interactive Mystery* series. Her has been

Generation Y, Echo Boomers, Gen Millennium, whatever you want to call them, are the biggest marketing opportunity in almost half a century.

Backgammon, Mah Jongg, and *Tetris*, there were very, very few playing "real gamer" games. Now, at least you'll find traces of women who dove headfirst into some of the more hardcore areas. You'll see ASK (Amazon Sex Kittens), an all-female *Unreal Tournament* clan; BLOW (Beautiful Ladies of War), a girl-domination *Half Life* team; EQWomen, women who play *EverQuest*; Evil Quake Goddesses, an all-female *Quake* clan; Gamegoddesses.com, Gamegal.com, and JoystickEnvy.com (and we all know we have it), womens' console only sites; WomenGamers.com; a rather hard-core site for women; GurlGamer.com, a full-featured game site; Ggirlz.com, and on and on and on. There are sites for shooter girls, RPG girls, girls who climb on rocks.... So yes, I think there are more women gamers now than a few years ago, but they are still a vocal but tiny, tiny slice of the hard-core pie. Hungry marketers should be thinking "more women gamers as designers."

The IGDA has a Women in Game Development Committee dedicated to exploring the role of women in, er, game development. Its mailing list that was extremely trafficked early on has petered out some.... Its talented female members are mostly producers and artists, with a few programmers and a tiny handful of designer types, and some students and peripheral people. However, since last June, the WGDC web forum has accumulated one entire thread (!) with seven posts, most of them from a man who calls himself Jellocaca that say: "I like womans. Why am I in the

around a lot longer than any of the above, and is dedicated, as are a lot of researchers, to the idea that girl-people are more process oriented than the more goal-oriented boy-people. *Nancy Drew* adventures seem to have been its marketable solution. Its philosophy is that girls will never become hard-core gamers, so we might as well throw in the towel and make games for who they really are. *Nancy Drew* boxes say "For adventurous girls," which is, of course, to imply that all the other software is for boys, right? Is this an acceptable solution?

Gaming should be non-gender-specific, but it isn't now, nor is it likely to be in the near future. More women designers! Sure, that might help pry open some of those 60 million little wallets. I don't know how soon we'll see more women wearing lead designer hats, though. Until then, we always have the likes of Will Wright (*Sim Everything* daddy) to make games that appeal to all of us. ●

INSIDE the sausage factory

details, details...

Popping-up an LOD system

When I was a kid, our family took regular vacations to the Rocky Mountains, driving hundreds of miles across the midwestern plains until the mountaintops gradually came into focus in the distance, and grew progressively more massive as we approached.

If I ever made a game version of this experience (say, *Sim StationWagon*), I'd be glad to omit multi-hour roadside delays while waiting for the tow-truck, and the inevitable arguments about who had cut the cheese. Other parts of the experience though, would be much worse on the PC.

"Sons, look ahead at the Denver skyline nestled against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains"

"All I see is endless fields..."

"Just wait a while longer... see there, a building just popped up out of the ground. And, wait... wait... wait... Right there!!! Did you see that mountain pop up?"

Almost all large-scale outdoor 3D games suffer from serious "pop-up." Major objects like mountains, buildings and vehicles are only visible if they're within a few hundred feet in front of the camera. As the camera moves forward, new objects pop-up fully-formed out of nowhere. The technical reason for this is that 3D game engines have a limited number of polygons that they can display per frame. If the limit is 10,000 polygons, and each object comprises about 500 polygons, then only the nearest 20 objects are drawn, and everything beyond them is "invisible."

PopTop's next project is an outdoor game where the player can get very close to the world, seeing buildings and vehicles from a distance of a few feet. But they can also see many miles into the distance, and even pull the camera back to see hundreds of square miles at a time. Our main technical concern was addressing the issue of pop-up and making sure that even distant objects are visible.

The solution to pop-up has been around for a while: Level of Detail (LOD). We certainly didn't invent LOD, but I think we've implemented it about as well as any game I've seen. Where we've gone beyond most games currently using LOD is in creating a strong system for both objects and terrain.

Object LOD basically boils down to using more detailed 3D meshes (say 1000 polygons for a typical building) for objects that are close to the camera, and lowering poly count gradually for objects that are further out (our lowest-detail buildings have about 50 polygons). In the last few years, several games have implemented variations of this system, though the results aren't always satisfactory. Shiny created the one used in *Messiah* and

Sacrifice, where the lower detail objects are computed on-the-fly by the game engine. The problem is that it essentially requires the game to be an artist, deciding how to rebuild the object with fewer polygons and still keep it attractive looking.

Unfortunately, computers lack aesthetic judgment, and the resulting low-detail objects don't always look very good. For our game, we chose to pre-create up to six different detail levels of each object, with our artists hand-creating the different versions, and the results are surprisingly good.

While the quality difference is obvious if you look at them close up, they're very hard to distinguish in the game as the game engine only switches to the lowest detail meshes when the objects are so far away that they're only a few pixels across.

Terrain LOD is a different matter. Like object LOD, it involves using more polygons on terrain that is close to the camera. However, our terrain LOD system also takes 'bumpiness' into account. Basically, parts of the map with significant variations in height (hills, mountains, valleys), are drawn with a disproportionate number of polygons. By shaving off polygons from flatlands, we're able to draw the basic forms of mountains even when they're a considerable distance (over 10 miles) from the camera. As the camera approaches them, they're drawn with more and more polygons, becoming more distinct, but there's never a point where the mountains suddenly pop on or off the screen. Because our terrain can be changed in-game, it's not feasible to let the artists pre-create the scaled down versions, so the LOD differences are more noticeable for terrain than for objects. Still, playing our game and seeing mountains and tiny buildings many miles out in the distance is refreshing after growing accustomed to the fog and pop-up of so many other outdoor 3D games.

I think you'll be amazed when you see the screenshots of *Sim StationWagon*... err... our unannounced next game. •



THREE finger salute roll over, everquest!

There's a new MMORPG in town

In part four of our three-part series on underground game developers, we look at Eric Fredricksen and his new game, *Progress Quest* (www.progressquest.com), called "the most refreshing innovation in RPGs since the Angband bot". This new massively multiplayer online role playing game is unique in that you can play while you're at home, at work, or even when you're away from the computer. Although I've logged nearly 150 hours and my 51st-level Half Man Shiv-Knight is well into Act IX, it hasn't interfered with my social life, my meals, or my personal hygiene.

Fredricksen has streamlined the micromanagement and reduced the tedium you find in some MMORPGs. He has phased out corpse retrieval, spawn camping, and long distance travel. Partly because of the simple interface, the magic and combat systems have virtually no learning curve. "Frustration" and "Progress Quest" are two words you'll never see in the same sentence. Fredricksen refers to it as "the first fire and forget RPG."

If you're not running a powerful rig, you'll be glad to know the hardware requirements are low. You can even play with a 28.8 modem.

"When I added the multiplayer components I discovered that the design lent itself surprisingly well to a network architecture that consumed very little bandwidth," Fredricksen explains, "Almost all of the sim computation is performed on the clients and the amount of network traffic required to keep them in lockstep is minimal, after compression."

When *Progress Quest* went live on February 1st, there were surprisingly few problems. "Our launch went extremely smoothly. Our uptime since then has been nearly 100%, with only one client update since then. The server component has certainly required some improvements, in particu-

and is now hopelessly out of date. Some of the spells (particularly Slime Finger, Mulligan, Grognor's Big Day Off, and Nestor's Bright Idea) are obviously overpowered. It looks there are bugs in the Fetch Me a Chicken and Deliver This Rock quests. There are multiple copies of the One True Albatross of Despair. There might be some balance problems in the character system, since everyone seems to want to play a Bastard Lunatic. Demicanadians and Dung Elves account for a disproportionate amount of the population, probably because of their racial bonuses. But these are the sorts of fixes that nearly any RPG will need and Fredricksen considers the development an ongoing process.

"Players have been asking for a lot of different features," he says when asked about his immediate plans for *Progress Quest*. "Such as a trading interface or an expanded world map. Some players would really like to see more buttons and interaction. In the short term I think I'll certainly be adding more types of quests, magical items, and beasts. The Jellyrock is one example. And I do expect to have to add more servers soon. As far as the longer term goes, I'd prefer to keep quiet for now, except to say that I wouldn't rule out subgames such as CCG's. And PvP is certainly near the top of the list."

Where does Fredricksen see *Progress Quest* in relation to games like *EverQuest* and *Dark Age of Camelot*? "I think that players on big, commercial MMORPGs begin to feel like a commodity," he says. "But *Progress Quest* is free, and we run it for fun. We want the players, not their money. More importantly, social interaction doesn't interfere with the gameplay. You can take part in the online community, or even go out for a beer, without negatively impacting your character's progression in the game." Don't I know it! [hic] ●

■ Some players would really like to see more buttons and interaction. In the short term I think I'll certainly be adding more types of quests, magical items, and beasts. ■

lar when our client authentication was broken for a while and several level 2 million characters appeared in our Hall of Fame. These hackers are in our Hall of Infamy now and we haven't had a problem since." Is nothing sacred? I wouldn't be surprised if one day you found this kind of cheating in *Diablo* and *Counter-Strike*.

There have been a few other problems with *Progress Quest*. Some players have complained that the new line of merchandise available on the website smacks of blatant commercialism. One forum post pointed out that the official Brady guide is obviously based on an earlier build of the game

1. Tom Chick, "Roll over, EverQuest!", *Computer Games Magazine*, May 2002

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